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NOVEL

6

Accomplishments
of the Duke's
Daughter



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Romello

Merellis

Louis

Pax

Gazell

Merelda



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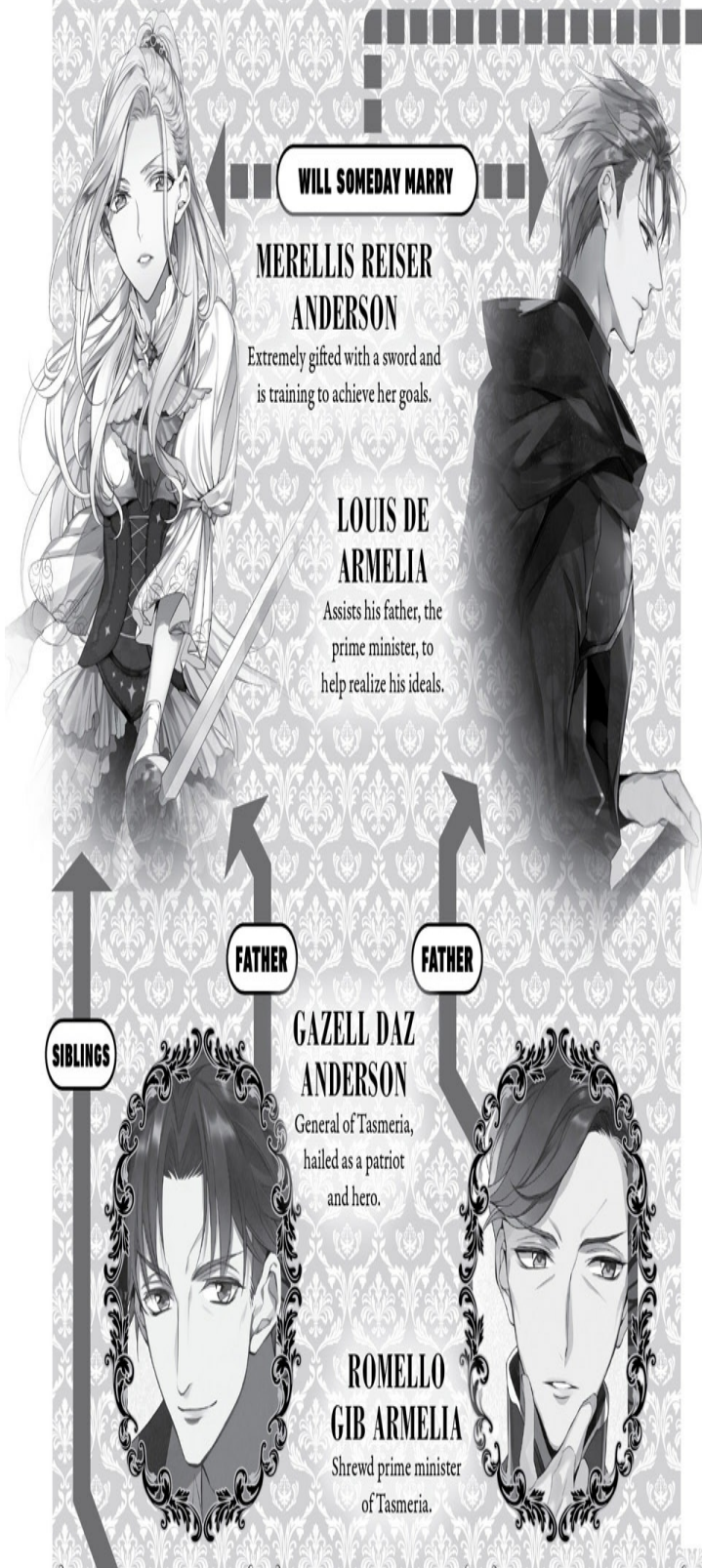
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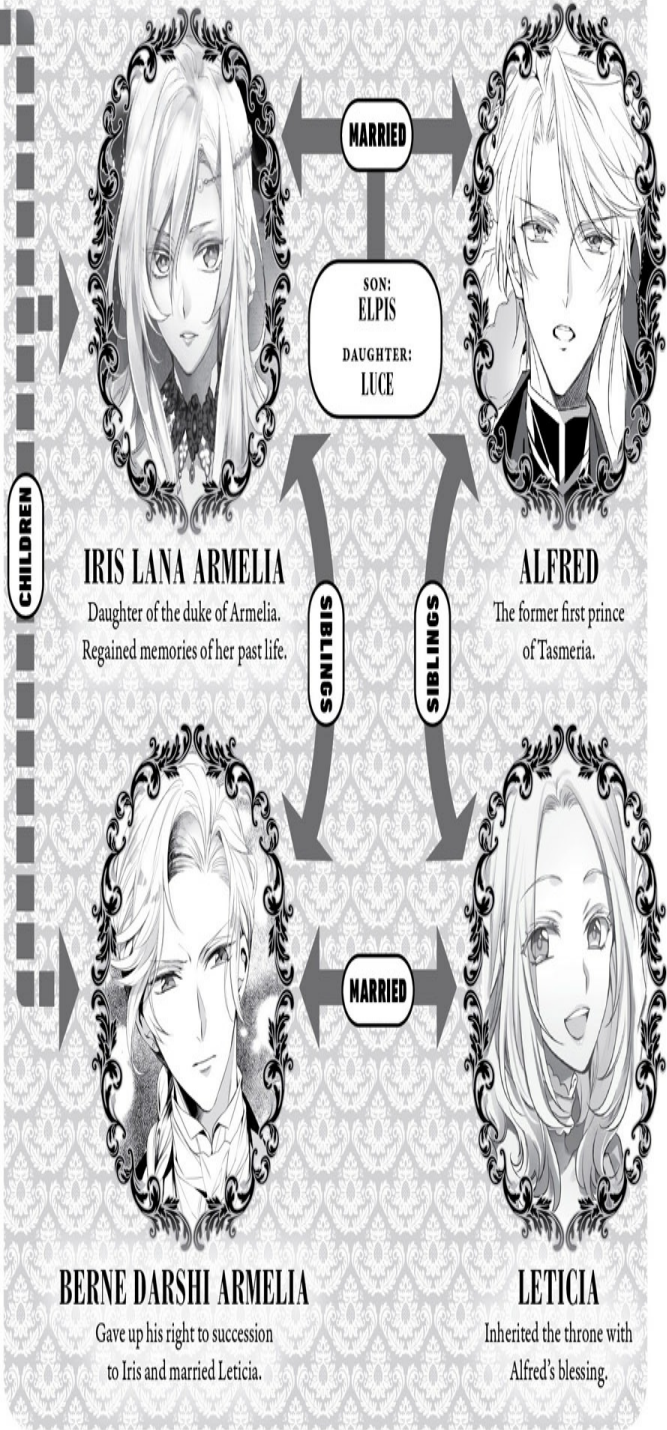
MERELLIS'S SAGA

This installment of the story follows Iris's mother, Merellis, when she was a young girl.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER

This story follows Merellis's daughter, Iris, on her journey as she overcomes her reputation as a villainess and finally achieves happiness.



characters

PAX TESS ANDERSON

A gifted war tactician and Merellis's older brother.

GALLIA

Soldier and commander of the House Anderson Guard.

SHREY

Soldier and deputy commander of the House Anderson Guard.

KREUZ

Gazell's right hand man.

MADAME CALUIS

The owner of a shop the guards frequent in the capital.

LURULIA

Works at Madame Caluis's shop.

KOUSHAKU FUJIN NO TASHINAMI Vol.6

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Prologue:

The Duke's Daughter's Curiosity

“OH, MY! It's so nice to see you again, Iris!” My mother's bright smile was incredibly reassuring, as it always was.

“It's been a long time, hasn't it?”

“How long will you be in the capital?”

“For about a week, I think. I'll be participating in the ceremony, of course, and I have several other banquets to attend. Then I'll go right home after that.”

“Goodness, you'll be leaving that soon? Well, I suppose I can't blame you. I understand the feeling of not wanting to be away from your husband for too long.” Mother giggled softly. I felt heat creeping over my cheeks. Honestly, I still wasn't used to the idea of having a husband, much less being teased about it.

“And how are the children?”

“Elpis is back home in Armelia, studying away. Luce is, well...” I trailed off with a sigh.

“Hm? Is there some kind of problem with Luce?”

“She's healthy and is a very well-behaved girl, but...” I trailed off again, prompting a serious expression to cross Mother's face. “She expresses no desire in learning the things most girls enjoy.

Instead, she's taken a passionate interest in her martial arts training and nothing else.”

“Oh!” Mother laughed.

But I just couldn't bring myself to laugh about it. My number-one priority as Luce's mother was to ensure her health and safety. I wanted her to be free to make her own decisions about her future, just as I had done. I truly, deeply believed in all of these things, but I constantly had to stop myself from saying, “You have to think seriously about what you'll do when you become an adult!”

“Maybe she’s just trying to be like Elpis? I heard that Lyle and Dida were training him.”

“I think she was, at first. But before we knew it, she just became obsessed with the idea...” It had gotten to the point where she wanted to spend every waking hour on her training. “She’s going to have to enter high society when she gets older, so she really should start honing those skills as soon as possible. I wouldn’t say it’s to the point where I think she’ll go down your path, but I am quite worried.”

Eventually, Luce would need to make her debut into high society as the daughter of a noble, just as I had. There would be certain things expected of her as the daughter of the duchess of Armelia, and as her mother, I wanted to make sure she had enough training so that she didn’t embarrass herself in that regard.

Much to my surprise, my mother burst out laughing in response. “Oh, Iris. I may have mentioned this before, but when I was Luce’s age, I was training just as she is. Hmm, now that I consider it, I don’t think I started learning etiquette until a year before I entered high society.”

“What?!” That was quite a shock, especially since my mother was called the Flower of High Society even now. Not only did she conduct herself with supreme elegance, but her impeccable taste set her apart from the rest. All women admired her, regardless of age.

“You know, now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve heard many stories about your youth, Mother.” The first time she told me anything about her past was when she took me up to the tower after I had lost myself in doubt. But other than that, I barely knew anything about my mother as a young woman.

But now I was incredibly curious. How did she become so strong? And how did she get to the point where she earned her nickname?

“If you don’t mind, I’d love to hear some stories about your past, Mother.”

She gave a wry smile and then started telling me about herself—the secret heroine of Tasmeria.

Chapter 1:

The Duchess's Origins

THE HEAVY, SOMBER SOUND of funeral bells tolled all around.

"Mother..." I called out to my mother, lying in the casket, who would never answer me again. Even though I knew that, she looked as if she were just sleeping. I couldn't help but call out to her, hoping beyond hope that she would open her eyes again.

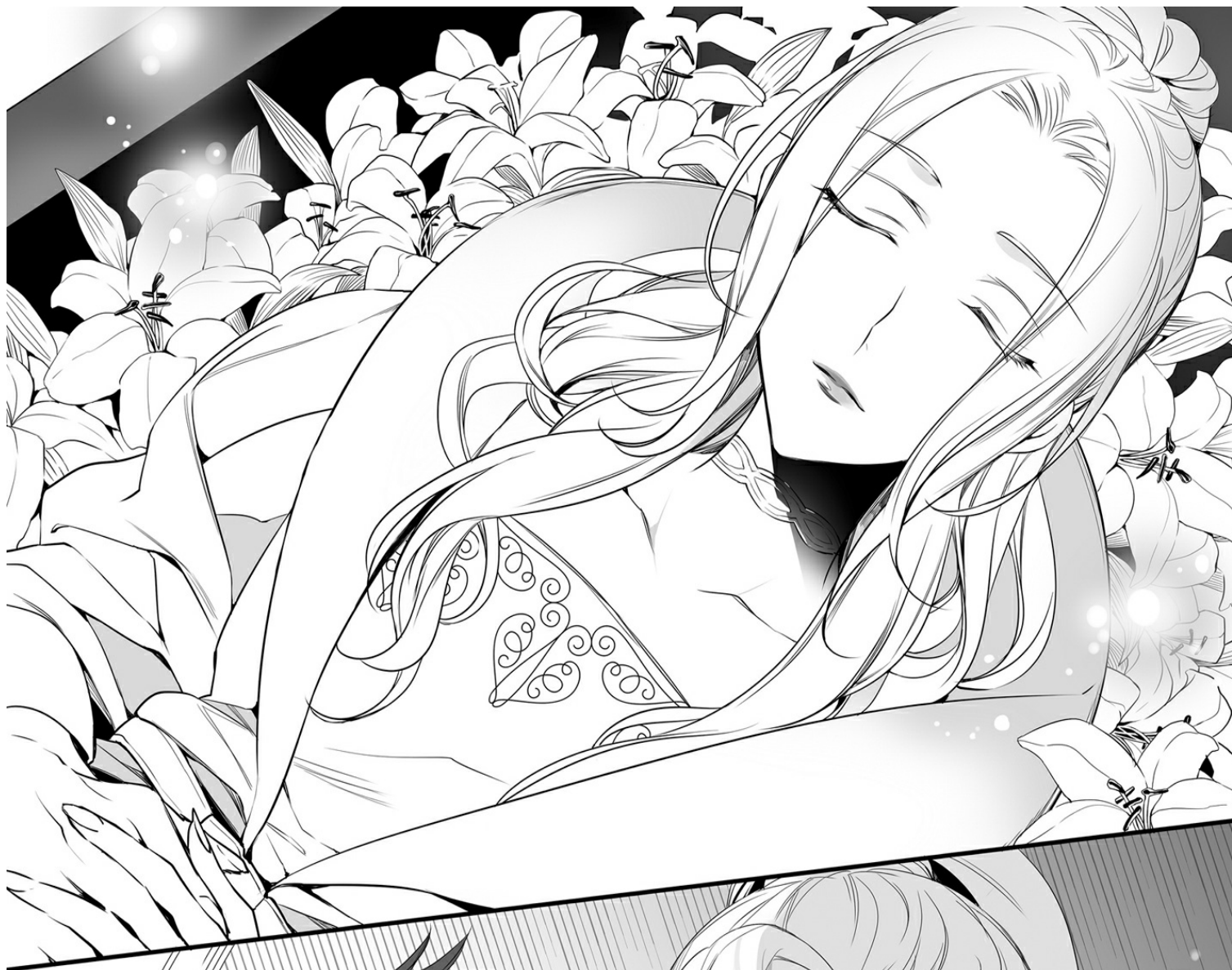
She wouldn't. No matter how much I cried or clung to her body, I couldn't turn back time. I would never see my mother smile or hear her voice ever again. The harsh reality stung, sending a wave of tears down my face. My body moved on its own accord, and I found myself by my mother's side, as if to cling onto her. But the coldness of her body reminded me that this was not a dream.

My name is Merellis. Full name: Merellis Reiser Anderson. My father is a war hero, and he was given land in our kingdom of Tasmeria and a title of marquis. I am his only daughter. My father always had a warm smile on his face, but now he was in the depths of despair. My older brother was sobbing loudly by his side. Mother was no longer here to tell him things like "Anderson boys pride themselves on their bravery. They don't cry over such trivial things." She was in a dream from which she would never wake up.

I heard sniffing and sobbing all around me. My mother was the sweetest, most wonderful woman ever. She would listen to anyone and was kind to absolutely everyone, regardless of who they were. So why? Why did this have to happen to her? My sadness suddenly shifted into a violent anger. This world was senseless. I understood that. No, I was *forced* to understand that. I bit my lip hard to suppress the urge to scream. The metallic taste of blood spread throughout my mouth.

"Merry, just think about your mother right now, all right?" My father's words brought me back to reality. *Is he reading my mind?* That thought went through my head, but it didn't matter right now. I turned my focus back to my mother.

“Mother...” I murmured again, softly. She didn’t answer, of course. Tears continued streaming down my face.



It was dark and cloudy outside, and the rain poured down as if it were further expressing everyone's sadness. I closed my eyes and prayed that my mother would rest in peace. When I opened them again, my father was right in front of me, and that was when I saw it. In my entire life, I'd never seen my father cry even once. But now, his cheeks were wet with tears.

Our kingdom had been engaged in a long battle with the neighboring kingdom, Tweil, up until about a decade ago. Tweil was to the northwest of Tasmeria. It was a poor country with largely barren soil and few natural resources. And that was why they attacked us; they had set their sights on our rich, fertile lands. It was sudden with no forewarning and no declaration of war. And because it came out of nowhere, we were wholly unprepared. Several domains in Tasmeria were completely overrun.

In the county of Ceyzan, both the kingdom's soldiers and the count's personal guard were entirely obliterated, and the domain had been taken under enemy occupation. The bordering territory belonged to Count Monroe and was attacked on both the northern and western sides, putting it into a very unfavorable position.

My father's regiment was given orders to take back Ceyzan's domain, and so he headed for battle, commanding the first brigade of the kingdom's army. One might question why my father, the eldest son and heir to the house of a marquis, was sent into a raging war. Often, sons of nobles were sent off to become knights to protect the capital and the royal family. However, those individuals were usually the second and third sons of a family. It was very rare for a house's eldest son to enter the service. Ultimately, my father found aristocratic society to be too stuffy, so despite being the eldest son, he looked past joining the knights and instead became a part of the kingdom's army.

The army's main responsibilities were to patrol and protect our borders and maintain peace within the kingdom. The soldiers of the army and the knights were like oil and water; the knights looked down upon the soldiers as nothing but classless, brawny oafs, and the soldiers saw the knights as spoiled rich boys who had never seen real battle.

As such, it was surprising that my father, a noble *and* the heir to a house of

marquis, had joined up with the soldiers, who were mostly commoners. I'd heard that he had it especially rough when he first joined up. There was a backlash against a noble joining the kingdom's army, and his family had been vehemently opposed to the idea as well. There was even talk of disinheriting him as a result.

Nevertheless, my father had used his natural strength to establish a solid position for himself within the army. Status didn't matter there, and the doors of opportunity were open to anyone. The army was a complete meritocracy, and once they saw how powerful my father was, the backlash against him quieted down quickly.

The real problem was with his family. They didn't completely disown him, but they had disinherited him and made his younger brother heir instead. Since my father had no attachments to status, I heard that he accepted the decision easily. My paternal grandfather had made a practical decision. One never knew if a soldier of the kingdom's army would die in battle, after all. Even though his family was a military house, leaving my father in place as the heir when he had joined the army and not the knights would ruin their reputation in the eyes of the other nobles.

...To anyone else who didn't recognize my father's strength, that is.

He shocked everyone and successfully recaptured Ceyzan's domain from the enemy with only one brigade of soldiers. Reinforcements arrived shortly afterward, and he handed off protection of the domain to them. He then led his soldiers west, where they joined up with the brigade fighting alongside Count Monroe's personal guard. Together, they accomplished a stunning defeat of the enemy. My father personally took the heads of countless enemy generals. In the end, he was hailed as a hero for his meritorious military deeds.

Despite his noble status, his achievements on the battlefield plus his natural leadership skills and charisma made him the object of admiration among the kingdom's army and the knights alike. My father was then reinstated as rightful heir of his family, because why would House Anderson, who prided themselves in their military prowess, not exalt my father? And because the reputation that follows a war hero is very meaningful, not one person raised an objection to this.

To be frank, he had a much tougher time marrying my mother. She was the daughter of a baron. I don't know precisely how they met, but apparently, they fell madly in love with each other and promised to marry. This wouldn't have been a problem if he had remained disinherited, but an extraordinary war hero and the future marquis of House Anderson marrying the daughter of a mere baron was simply unheard of. In that regard, his war hero's reputation worked against him.

Countless noble houses from all over the kingdom wanted to marry their daughters off to him. There were also many in House Anderson who objected to my parents' union. But my father silenced all his critics with a dramatic declaration. "If I can't marry Merelda, then I'll quit the army!"

Now, of course, it was a lovely, heartwarming story that showed just how much Father had cared for Mother. Since they had been so deeply in love with each other, they still had a wonderful marriage even after my brother and I were born. So much so that sometimes my brother and I had to look away from their displays of affection!

My normally big, tough father was a total sweetheart around her. He acted so differently from how he was at work that his trusted confidant, Baron Messi, often had to avert his eyes when he came over to visit as well.

My mother truly was a wonderful woman. She was so gentle and kind. She certainly faced many difficulties marrying into a house of marquis, but she always had a sweet smile on her face. Still, it took nerves of steel to be married to my father. There were times that he would come home covered in someone else's blood, and once she saw he had no injuries, she would smile and say, "Goodness, look at that mess! Let me get the bath ready for you!" That always surprised me and my brother, and we would joke that he should really get cleaned up before he came into the house.

My father always took the day of their wedding anniversary off, saying he wanted to spend time with my mother. If the soldiers begged him to come into work, he reluctantly would do so, but once he was finished with his duties, he'd race straight home. In what world would it be otherwise normal for a husband to come home to his wife on their anniversary covered in blood, one might ask? Well, it was normal in our house.

Our family consisted of Father, Mother, my older brother, and me. Even though we were a house of high-ranking nobles, things never felt stiff or formal at home. It was a very, very happy home.

At least, until that one fateful day.

I would never forget the day that my mother died.

"Brother, isn't Mother home yet?"

"How many times are you going to ask me that, Merry? If she's traveling according to schedule, she should be in the neighboring domain by now. Just wait patiently."

My brother and I eagerly waited for Mother to come home that day. She had left Father in the capital and was on her way home to the march to celebrate my birthday. Father had an important ceremony to attend, so he was going to come on his own later, but I was thrilled that Mother would be coming home.

"Oh! I bet that's Mother!"

I heard excitement through the mansion, so I rushed down to the foyer. But the source of commotion wasn't my mother. It was a man covered in blood... holding a woman also covered in the same.

"What are y—Lady Merelda!" A scream pierced my ears.

Mother? Wait, was that limp woman covered in blood...Mother?

I couldn't move. It felt like ice had covered my body and frozen it solid. All I could do was stand there, watching the chaotic scene as if I were observing it from a distance.

"Someone hurry! Call the doctor!"

Servants screamed and ran about. The man handed Mother to a servant and then collapsed on the spot.

"You're seriously injured too! You need help!"

"Don't worry about me; take care of Lady Merelda!"

"Of course, we'll take care of the mistress, but if we don't help you, you'll—"

"I'm alrea—" The man's face twisted with pain, and suddenly, blood came

pouring out of his mouth, slowly turning the carpet crimson beneath him. “We were attacked by bandits... They killed all the other guards but me. I managed to bring Lady Merelda back here. How is she?!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of her.”

“Thank goodness...” the man whispered with relief and then closed his eyes for the final time.

“The doctor is here!”

“Doctor, hurry!”

“What about this man?”

“It’s too late for him. Please, help me tend to the mistress.” The servant had tears streaming down her face but was trying her best to keep her composure. For a second, a hush fell over the room, and the doctor rushed over to Mother’s side. Finally, I came back to my senses and followed the doctor on unsteady feet. He leaned over my mother to tend to her wounds but then sat back on his heels.

“I’m very sorry, but...” He spoke reluctantly, bringing looks of horrified despair to everyone’s faces.

No, don’t look like that! Don’t say those things! Hurry up and heal my mother!

But the screams inside of my heart were in vain because the doctor stood up.

“No! Mother! Mother!!!”

She’s dead? No! It’s a lie! Lies, lies, lies!

I don’t remember much about what happened after that. The only things etched into my memories from that time were my violent emotions. Why did my mother have to die? Since I was born into a military house, I had learned about the harsh realities of death from a very young age. And that even though Father was very strong, he was still human. My parents told us that every time he went to work, there was a possibility that he would never return. It wasn’t because they were being pessimistic, but they wanted us to be prepared for reality. They were also proud that he risked his life every day for the sake of the kingdom. Protecting the citizens was an honorable thing and part of a noble’s sacred duty.

So then why was it Mother? Why did *she* have to die? My father was carrying out his duty as a noble. Mother was a citizen of the kingdom, so why hadn't she been protected too? Why had her life been stolen from her?

I didn't care if they were bandits. The perpetrators were also citizens of this kingdom. What had my father even been fighting for? Why had he worked so hard to protect this kingdom? Why did the nobles have to risk their lives to protect the citizens anyway?!

This world was senseless. I understood that. No, I was *forced* to understand that.

Not only was I a tomboy, but thanks to my brother's influence, I hadn't learned any etiquette or manners befitting a noblewoman at all. Instead, I often rolled around in the gardens of the Anderson manor covered in mud and climbed trees in my fancy dresses. My mother would give me a nonplussed yet soft smile as I tumbled through the door, day after day. But after all, she was the same woman who wasn't fazed when my father came home soaked in blood.

I should have spent more time with her. Maybe if I had taken up embroidery or some other thing more suitable for a young girl, I could have. But after Mother's death, instead of picking up those hobbies to honor her in some way, I went in the exact opposite direction. After her funeral, I cried until I just couldn't cry anymore. I cried and cried until a hole opened up in my heart, and those violent emotions I felt for a split second during her funeral came back with a vengeance. To be specific, they were anger and hatred. I wanted revenge, and I lamented my own powerlessness. I cursed the senselessness of the world and felt ashamed by my inability to do anything.

And so that was why I went to Father and begged him to train me in combat. He never asked me why. Instead, he told me, "Since you're asking for this, don't expect me to go easy on you." From that next day forward, I threw myself headfirst into my training.

Before my formal training began, my father made me undergo various conditioning exercises to build up my strength. "You're a lot more agile than I

expected,” he declared at the end of the routine. I apparently had much more stamina than other children my age, perhaps from a childhood filled with running around the grounds of the manor. The obstacles in the exercises weren’t a big deal to me either, possibly from years of playing in the forest. Maybe it was because I’d spent so much time chasing after wild animals that my visual acuity and reflexes were so sharp as well.

“You’re still not ready for my training.” After that, the regimen he prescribed was a sort of hell I never wanted to go through again. I would wake up before the sun rose each morning and had to run three laps around the manor. One might not think that to be much, but the Anderson manor was a very large mansion, so running three laps around it was incredibly tough.

“Ugh...” Some days, after I was done with my laps, I felt so sick that I thought I would throw up. I was then given a drink containing a mixture of salt and sugar to replenish my energy, and after I rested for a bit, it was time to resume my exercises. Next, I had to traverse the forest on the manor grounds. There were all kinds of obstacles inside the forest, so it wasn’t as easy as it may sound. For example, there was a stream running through the center of a chasm that I had to cross. There was no bridge, and the stream was at least ten feet across. I had to climb down the steep sides of the cliff, cross the stream, and then climb back up the other side to continue. The forest on our property had remained untouched like this under direct orders from my father to facilitate training exercises.

“Ah!” Unfortunately, my hand struck a rocky crag as I shimmied up the cliffs one time, bursting open a blister. I looked down to see my palm covered in blood. I dropped back down to the river to wash it from my hands. The water was clear and shimmered in the sunlight, but rivulets of crimson spread through it as I washed away my blood. I tore off a scrap of dry cloth from my clothing and wrapped it around my hand. I then climbed back up the side of the cliff and continued my training.

I developed blisters from sword practice every day. Each afternoon, I practiced swinging a blade, recreating the movements Father had taught me. The sword didn’t feel that heavy when I just held it in my hand, but after several hundreds or thousands of practice strokes through the air, my arm would feel

numb from practice.

I steeled myself against the pain as I reached the top of the cliff and made it through the forest again and again. Then it would be time to run once more. Only at that point could I finally take a break for lunch. Even if I didn't feel hungry, I had to eat or else I wouldn't have the energy to keep up with my exercises. Every day I cleared my plate, no matter what. I had a short time to rest after that, and then I would practice with my sword until the sun went down, which was around the same time as when my father came home. Then I would eat again and afterward collapse into my bed. That was my daily routine.

"Don't expect me to go easy on you." My father was true to his word. He never allowed even one complaint. He looked on with no reaction as I threw up from overexertion. I knew that if I ever cried or fussed, he would stop training me immediately. Because of that, I never allowed myself to do either. I threw myself into my training as if I were possessed. I was a little girl, not even ten years old, who trained instead of playing from morning till night. I was consumed with thoughts of becoming stronger and getting vengeance. I ate, slept, and breathed my training.

"All right. Now I'm going to teach you the proper forms." I'm not sure how long I had devoted myself to building up my strength and stamina before Father told me that one day and switched gears. He always watched me swinging my sword silently without critique or instruction, so I wondered what prompted him to say that all of a sudden. But before I could ask him, he began to demonstrate proper techniques. I figured I was to watch and then copy him.

I had so many questions, but I had to leave them behind as I switched gears to focus on the movements he demonstrated in front of me. I tried to burn every gesture, every movement into my mind so intently that I even forgot to blink.

"Practice that," was all Father said before he walked away. Left alone, I remembered what he had done and emulated it over and over again. But I just couldn't move how I wanted to. My body didn't know how to act in the same way that Father had. My limbs felt awkward and green. I was angry at how my body moved, and I was frustrated that I couldn't do it. It was even worse

because I could *imagine* myself going through those same motions, but I just couldn't do it. It probably goes without saying that after that day, I added practicing my form to my daily exercise regimen.

"Ahh!" I looked down to see spots of dark red on my dominant hand as another blister burst. I tore off a scrap of fabric from a towel and wrapped it around my hand. *It doesn't hurt. It's not painful.* I told myself that even though it *did* hurt, and it *was* painful. In fact, the pain fueled the violent anger and hatred inside of me even more. That was why I wouldn't stop. I *couldn't* stop. I continued my sword practice that day and continued training like that every day after.

Once I had committed the movements my father had taught me to my muscle memory, I was allowed to begin mock duels with my brother. Well, I say "duels," but in reality, they were little more than light sparring matches. However, they were necessary to further ingrain those proper forms into my body. Practicing by myself was vastly different from sparring with someone else. As I did it, I truly understood that this was necessary for both of us to become stronger. And of course, I kept up my usual exercises while I trained with my brother.

"*Hah, hah...*" I panted, wiping the sweat from my brow and looking down at my palms. At some point, my skin had grown so tough and calloused that I rarely got blisters anymore. They no longer looked like a little girl's hands. But seeing that made me happy, because it was a physical representation of my training. A dark, satisfied smile spread across my face. I looked back up and saw my brother sitting on the ground in front of me, completely exhausted. I myself was bent over with one hand on my knee, struggling to catch my breath.

"Next, you'll spar with me, Merry." My father suddenly appeared and announced this to us. I stared at him in stunned silence, but when I realized what he said, I smiled.

Finally. I've finally gotten to the point where Father has recognized my abilities and will spar with me! I felt a feeling of accomplishment and happiness I'd never felt before. But at the same time, I felt a little nervous and frightened. "Gladly, Father!"

And so my very first one-on-one sparring match with Father began. Maybe he was holding back with me; I'm not sure. But from my perspective, his movements felt absolutely merciless.

"What? That's all you've got?" He looked down at me as I lay collapsed on the ground. I thought I had gotten so much stronger, but I was powerless in front of him. It was frustrating. I crawled across the dirt and looked up at my father. There was an obvious gap between us—of experience, strength, and speed—and I came up short in absolutely every way. That meant I had to come up with *something* to make up for it.

My father had also lost something precious because of this senseless world. How much stronger must I become? I didn't know. But at the very least, I knew by the way my father was looking down at me that I had a long way to go before I got there. I pushed off the ground with trembling hands and stood up again.

"Not yet, Father."

And we began to spar once more.

Today ended in yet another pitiful defeat. *I wonder how many times I've lost to him by now.* I let that thought run through my head, but I was mostly focused on the day's training. I felt like I was so close to grasping something—the magical "something" that I needed to bridge the gap between me and Father. If I could only grab hold of it, perhaps I could actually have a chance in our sparring matches.

I felt like if I just returned to my room now, the sensation I'd felt when I thought I was so close to grasping that thing would feel even further away. I let out a deep sigh. I didn't know what else to do and couldn't think of any alternatives, so I reluctantly returned to my room to take a bath. It was an essential part of my daily routine since my training always left me covered in sweat and dirt.

"Ahhh...!" The hot water stung my scrapes and cuts, and I nearly fainted in agony. There wasn't an inch of my body that didn't have some kind of scratch on it, so every time I washed, I would cry out in pain. This had come to be just

another part of my daily routine as well.

I wouldn't let the servants wash me, as it was better to prepare myself for the pain when I did it myself, rather than have someone else do it. Even if it *did* mean agony either way. After I finished bathing, I would change into my nightclothes and get into bed. The best part about training was that it was so exhausting that I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. If not for that, my mind would be too busy, and I wouldn't be able to sleep. All sorts of thoughts would come to mind, like my mother's death, the grief and sadness that came along with it, my hatred toward her attackers, and I'd blame myself for all of it. That's what I had done before I began my training; I spent so many sleepless nights plagued by those thoughts. But now, I fell right to sleep and sank into the world of dreams, praying that maybe this time they'd be good ones.

It was the dawn of a new day. I got up, changed my clothes, and started my laps around the manor. I hadn't been throwing up after I was done running these days, and that meant I could go even farther. As I ran, my thoughts turned to what I'd been thinking about the day before. *What was that thing that I'm lacking?* While I was sparring with Father, I felt like I was right on the verge of grasping the answer. I got too frantic, and now I didn't even know why I'd thought about it in the first place. I tried and tried, but I just couldn't figure it out.

After I was done with my laps, I wiped off my sweat from my overheated body so I didn't cool off too much. I would have to spar with my father again this afternoon. I still didn't know what that "something" was, but as long as I didn't know, nothing would change, and I wouldn't make progress. And that meant that Father would beat me once again. If I didn't grow, then I would never be able to overcome my biggest obstacle: him.

Still, I felt like I was so close. My instincts were whispering that to me. I knew there was no point in continuing to agonize over it if I didn't know the answer, so the only thing I could do was to sharpen my senses by training more and more.

It was time for the day's mock duel with my father. As usual, he wielded his

sword quickly and with a heavy hand. I couldn't let my guard down for one second or he'd take advantage of the opening. Still, I somehow managed to keep up with him.

"Weak!" My father's sword closed in on me once again, but I instantly thrust my sword in front of me. *If I can't dodge him, then I have to do something else!* I unconsciously changed the angle of my sword ever so slightly, sweeping away the pressure from his sword. That sensation made me freeze for a split second. *This is it!*

But before I could resume my thoughts, his wooden sword whacked my completely vulnerable body.

"Why did you stop? Opening yourself up to your opponent like that is absolutely inexcusable!"

I grimaced at the dull pain that lingered and stood back up. "I'm sorry. Again, please!"

I was still missing something. I wondered if I just wasn't capable of grasping it yet. My father's swordsmanship was strong and mighty. I had a little girl's body, weaker than his, and no matter how much I trained I would never be as strong as him. With that being the case, maybe I had to learn how to offset my opponent's strength to use it against them. That must be the way.

Father was coming toward me again. I swung my sword against his attack. "Argh!" I fended off his advance and got in close. I brought up my sword and placed it right against his neck.

"*Hah, hah...*" I panted. I couldn't believe I had just done that. I won. I *won*, even if my father was going easy on me.

"I was weak..." He said with a hearty laugh as he stood up. That was the first time he'd ever smiled at me during our training. That surprised me even more. "Let's do another. Next time, I'll use a bit more force."

"All right!"

True to his word, my father moved faster and stronger than before. Right off the bat, I found it hard to respond to his movements, and he knocked the sword out of my hand. "Again, please!"

I threw myself into sparring with him once again.

Despite losing several times, I fervently devoted myself to our matches. Eventually, I was able to consistently win about one bout of every five.

One day, Father said, “All right. Starting tomorrow, you’re going to be training with the guard.”

“Huh?” His order was so out of the blue that I blurted out a baffled noise. “The guard” he was talking about was the House Anderson guard, our family’s private security force. They were warriors who were loyal to our house. Generations of boys born into the Anderson family were trained from a young age in the art of combat so as not to bring dishonor to the family name. The guard endured rigorous training to ensure they were strong enough to protect such a family. That was what made them the strongest private security force in Tasmeria.

It was incredibly tough to get into the guard, and even after making it in, members had to endure tough training day in and day out. That was why they took great pride in their military prowess and their jobs as members of the House Anderson guard.

We had a large area on the grounds solely for sparring matches between males of House Anderson and members of the guard. My father had also insisted that the courtyard of our manor in the capital be razed and had a sparring area installed so that his skills wouldn’t be dulled during his time there. It wasn’t just the guard who would train there at the capital with him, but also soldiers from the kingdom’s army and knights who admired my father as well. I had a feeling that I wasn’t the only one who felt like our house in the capital felt less like a noble family’s mansion and more like a military institution.

And I was going to be permitted to train with them?! I let out a gleeful laugh despite myself. I was overcome with excitement. Up until now, I’d only trained with my father and brother, and that was fine, of course, but I *really* wanted to try sparring with other people. Most of all, I wanted to test my own abilities. I was sure that I would become even stronger if I got to experience fighting with all types of people. Just the thought of it was thrilling for me. Seeing my

reaction put an odd smile on my father's face.

The next day, I headed to the sparring grounds in high spirits. When I arrived, I saw that I clearly stood out among the men there, who were twice my size.

"Hey, what's a kid doing here?"

"N-no idea. Go see what she wants."

"Huh? No way! I always end up making kids cry."

Well, I suppose it might be rude to say so, but if I were a normal child, I'd probably think he *did* look kind of scary.

"Hey, little girl. What are you doing? It's dangerous here, so you should run along."

"Hello. My name is Mer. I'm going to be training here starting today. Please give me your guidance and discipline." I made sure to introduce myself politely and properly because I knew first impressions were very important. Also, at my father's suggestion, I used a different nickname from my usual one. It would be unheard of for the daughter of a marquis to be training here. After my remarks, the men looked even more bewildered.

"Attention!" one of the guards suddenly barked. His voice was so sharp that it rattled my eardrums, and for a second, I was frozen to the spot. The other guards must have been used to it, though, because they immediately assembled into straight lines and stood at attention with perfect posture.

"The master is here!"

Once everyone was lined up, my father appeared. I glanced over at the men's expressions, and their eyes were sparkling like little boys' as they gazed at my father.

"Hello, everyone. Glad to see you're all looking great today," he said with his usual hearty laugh. But the next moment, the smile vanished from his face and was replaced with a stern expression. "Now I see that she's already introduced herself, but Mer here will be training with all of you starting today. There's no need to go easy on her, because I already personally oversaw her basic training. I want you all to work with her in hopes of passing along your strength."

His deep voice made me tremble for a moment. Was it out of fear? No, that wasn't it. I was trembling from *excitement*. I could tell just how serious my father was, and I was ridiculously excited to further my training.

"I'm looking forward to learning from you!" I pushed my voice out from deep in my belly and saw my father chuckle.

"All right. Let's begin!"

As the training started, I was surprised to see that the routine was much easier than what I'd been used to with him. That was probably because lately my father had let me suggest additions to my usual regimen.

Once the conditioning exercises were over, it was time for sword practice. My blade sliced through the air. Each time I swung my sword, I cut through all of the unnecessary thoughts in my mind. The stillness I felt in my heart was very pleasant and comforting. It felt like at my core, everything inside of me was connected. I focused on that feeling, and sword practice was over before I knew it.

Finally, it was time for one-on-one sparring matches. Two names were called, and those two people faced off against each other in a match. I hungrily watched every detail and took in every movement. I picked up on new things I'd never seen before and learned from them. There were things I could imitate, but there were also moves that would be difficult for me to perform because of my size. But I watched on, thinking about how I would respond if my opponent were to move this way or that.

"Next is Mer and Lada!" My name was finally called as part of the last pair. The man I was up against was the one who had noticed me first and been confounded by my presence. He now looked even more perplexed at being told to spar with me.

"Begin!" The instructor called out.

But Lada did not move. It looked like he had no idea how to approach an opponent like me. It seemed that he wasn't going to make the first move no matter how long I waited, so I decided that I would. I lunged forward and swung my sword.

“Whoa!” Lada’s eyes widened with surprise as he moved to block my sword with his. Unfortunately for him, the force of the collision knocked him off balance. I used that to my advantage and forced him to roll onto the ground. I then thrust my sword right in front of his face.

“Th-the winner is Mer!”

The crowd buzzed. It was a stunning conclusion to the day, and the men were shocked that I had won. However, I wasn’t pleased. I didn’t even feel like it’d been a fair fight; he had let down his guard.

“Lada... Didn’t you hear me? The girl has already completed basic training under me. This is a bad habit of yours, you know that? Every time you’re paired up with a weaker opponent than you, you let down your guard. On the battlefield—no, actually, *anywhere*—there are no weak opponents or strong opponents. There are only enemies whom you must defeat at all costs. Whoever is victorious is the strong one. You need to fix this bad habit of yours.”

“Yes, sir. I apologize.” Lada’s head dropped after my father’s harsh criticism.

“Mer, you’ll go again, won’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Next! Guntz, step forward.” At my father’s orders, another man came forward to replace Lada.

“A-all right, next up is Guntz versus Mer. Begin!” The instructor called for our match to start.

I could tell just by looking at my opponent that he did not have his guard down against me. *Very good*. I smirked as I took on his sharp skills with the sword. However, his movements were slower than my father’s, and I could tell that the strength behind his sword was weaker than my father’s as well. Perhaps it wasn’t fair to compare my opponent to someone like my father to begin with, but it was enjoyable sparring with an opponent who did not move like him. After we sparred for a bit, I lunged forward and knocked his sword out of his hand. Now disarmed, Guntz was completely vulnerable to me, and I pressed my blade against his neck.

The area went silent. No one said a word or even moved a muscle.

“The winner is...Mer.” The instructor said with hesitation.

“Now you’ve witnessed Mer’s skill for yourselves. Does anyone object to training with her?” My father opened the floor for comments, but no one spoke up. I laughed, realizing he was testing them. “Good. That’s enough for today. Use the rest of your time as you like.” And with that, the day’s exercises were over.

But what should I do now? Honestly, today had been hard for me to swallow, although I had learned a lot. I felt so excited to have fought against someone other than my father or brother. I set down my sword and started to run laps around the sparring grounds.

“Master, where did you find that girl?” asked Gallia, the commander of the House Anderson guard.

General Gazell Daz Anderson gave him a half smile. “Why? Are you curious?”

“Yes, she’s quite skilled.”

“It’s just not possible! How can she beat members of the guard at such a young age?” Shrey, the deputy commander, spoke up from beside Gallia. He was very young to have attained the rank of deputy commander, which was a testament to his own abilities. The fact that these two were praising Merellis after only one day meant that the soldiers had recognized her merits.

“If that was all, the soldiers would probably have an issue with it. But after the matches, they were all watching her practice by herself with interest. Not only that, but they all looked stunned. I asked a few of the men about it later, and they said it reminded them of boot camp.”

Boot camp...also known as initiation through hell. Most of those chosen for the Anderson House guard were already known for their abilities, so General Gazell personally devised training plans that would knock them down a peg or two. The results were immediate. Just witnessing the general’s power was enough to humble them, and they understood that the reason that he got to be so strong was because he trained in the same manner that he was training them. Naturally, his instruction was incredibly tough. The mere fact that a child

such as Merellis could take on men who had undergone the training that they had shocked them all.

“Just so you know, not even I was willing to train her that hard at first. She started with half of what she does now.”

“Even half is a lot,” the usually very serious Gallia quipped.

Shrey let out a peal of dry laughter. “She’s such a cute little girl. Shouldn’t she want to be out playing? I wonder why she’s so invested in training.”

Gazell looked off into the distance, reflecting on the past. They were right; she truly was a beautiful little girl. She had platinum blonde hair and eyes so clear and blue that they looked like aquamarines. She would grow up to be an even more beautiful woman. Her features were so striking, it was already hard to keep your eyes off her. He was genuinely looking forward to seeing what kind of woman she would become.

And yet here she was, covered in scratches and bruises, training in combat with full-grown men. Under normal circumstances, it would be completely unheard of for any noble, let alone a young girl, to be doing this. The greatest reason why Gazell had allowed her to undertake such training was because he recognized a God-given talent in her. But after his wife’s death, he also wanted to make sure his daughter had the skills necessary to defend herself. Still, there was no reason for her to train so relentlessly. She could have had a much more relaxed training regimen and been done with it. The reason he didn’t dissuade her was because he wanted to let her natural talent grow to its limits.

This all started because of what happened during his wife’s funeral. He lost his love in an unimaginable way and was overcome with grief. He cursed his own powerlessness; people called him a hero, and yet he couldn’t protect someone who was so precious to him. To make matters crueler, the person who had murdered his wife hadn’t even been someone from the enemy country who was burning with revenge. The deed had been done by one of his very own countrymen.

When he had seen how stricken with grief his children were at the funeral, his sadness only grew. But for a moment during the ceremony, he had felt goosebumps rising on his flesh. His chills were because his instincts had alerted

him that there was someone of great strength nearby, and it was coming from someone among the funeral party. As he swept the room searching for the source of danger, he realized that his gaze had landed on his own daughter.

For a moment, he had doubted his own senses. After all, his young daughter wasn't even ten, and he had sensed such intensity from her that it gave him chills. And not only that, but he'd felt *danger*—he, a general who had faced off against countless formidable foes. When he had looked at his daughter, she had stopped crying and instead was biting her lip so hard it drew blood. Her eyes were filled with the flames of hatred. He had instantly known what she was thinking just from one glance at the girl's face. And the emotions that had been radiating from her were enough to set off his own warning bells.

"Merry, just think about your mother right now, all right?" he had said to her. For a moment, Merellis had stared at him blankly but then quickly turned her focus back on her mother's form, shedding more tears. The funeral had been a devastatingly sad affair indeed, but it was over before he knew it. The days he'd spent since then had been very turbulent. He threw himself right into his work to escape from his grief.

His wife was such a large presence in his life, and the wounds would never heal. But as the days went by, he gradually came to terms with his emotions. He vowed to annihilate the bandits who had done this, and his mindset returned to a healthy state. But just around the time he made that shift, Merellis came to him and asked him to train her.

For a moment, he was bewildered. He should have agreed right away; he was thinking about teaching her self-defense techniques himself anyway. But the look in her eyes told him that self-defense wasn't what she was after. That caused him to hesitate. It was more than enough that he'd embarked upon a blood-soaked path to vengeance himself, without bringing her into it. But at the same time, he wanted to cultivate the undeniable talent he saw in front of him. He agreed to train her before he even realized what he was doing.

He expected her to complain right away. He wanted her to. But the young girl never uttered a single complaint the entire time he trained her. She was clearheaded and determined to travel down the path laid before her. He laughed internally and had to call himself a hypocrite. He knew the best

decision would be to stop her and put an end to her training. He couldn't count how many times he'd thought, *"Please, complain. Just give me an excuse to stop this!"*

On the other hand, when he saw how dedicated she was, he felt pride in his daughter. She surpassed his expectations at every turn in the road. He was even looking forward to seeing how strong she would become. And so, at some point, he found himself giving up on stopping the training. Instead, he gave her a sword and taught her correct form. At first her swordsmanship was awkward, but gradually, it became more polished and refined. So quickly, in fact, that it amused him greatly. In no time at all, her skills rivaled that of her brother who was three years older than her, and he made them spar. Before long, his son was no match for her, so he began to face off against her himself. They had a great difference in height, strength, and speed, but she gave her all in every match. She gradually came up with ways to compensate for the difference in their skills and maneuverability. At some point, he felt chills when he faced her, as that same incredible talent he had first sensed at the funeral returned.

He smiled then, knowing that his judgment hadn't been wrong. She was a prodigy. That wasn't to say she could master things immediately, because she couldn't. However, she understood things without being taught, and then deepened her knowledge of techniques when she was finally taught them properly. That was her talent.

"Master?" Gallia asked with concern when Gazell was silent for so long. His voice brought the general back to reality.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I was just thinking. Why does she want to get stronger, you ask? Well, it's the same reason that I do."

"And what's that?"

"I cursed my own powerlessness when something precious was taken from me. And from that powerlessness came a resolve from within."

"A wish for revenge? Is that why you took her on as a student?"

"I told you, she's got the same reason I do." An utterly sad and weak expression came over Gazell's face then, the likes of which the two men had never seen before. "But most of all, I was giddy to discover a talent so young,"

he said with a laugh, lightening the heavy mood in the air. The two of them nodded in agreement. “Take care of her for me and lead her if you can. I haven’t the right to do it myself, although I do care about her guidance.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Of course.”

The two of them said in agreement. “Pardon us for keeping you, Master. We’ll be going now.” The pair then excused themselves and left the room.

After they were gone, Gazell left to go to the sparring grounds. On the way there, he saw his son Pax and stopped. He realized Pax was watching Merellis as she trained, smiling with a tender look on his face. He, too, had been subjected to Gazell’s rigorous training and excelled amongst his peers, but he wasn’t anywhere near as strong as Merellis. He was keenly aware of that.

It puzzled Gazell to see that his son had so readily accepted reality and was now watching over her with such kindness. “Doesn’t it frustrate you?” he asked his son after a bit of a pause.

Pax looked up at Gazell with a confused look on his face. “Not at all. I’m a member of House Anderson, and your son. But most of all, I recognize my own limits.” He had a contented smile on his face.

“Your limits? Don’t you think it’s better to try to break them?”

“Father, I admit that it’s foolish to limit oneself and give up. But at the same time, isn’t it necessary to be honest about my own strength? She and I are coming from two very different positions. This may sound audacious, but it’s not that I don’t think I could beat the adults you would have me spar against. I just don’t have the same vision she has; I can’t compete with her in that regard. When one witnesses a true genius, I think it’s foolish to be jealous of them.”

Gazell nodded with admiration for his son as the boy spoke calmly in a matter-of-fact manner. He was speaking the truth, after all. It was crucial to know your own strength and to know when it was wisest to withdraw. His son reacted calmly and maturely even when the man tried to light a fire under him. The boy had his own unique talents.

As Pax said, the young man wasn’t weak. He wouldn’t stand a chance against

one of Gazell's right-hand men, of course, but he might be able to beat one of the newbies who'd trained under the general. Gazell honestly thought his son was capable of being an excellent military commander when he grew up, but at the same time, he entertained the possibility that Pax's talents lay elsewhere. He didn't have that same interest or hunger for battle like his daughter did. However, he had the aptitude to become a gifted tactician on the battlefield with the uncanny ability to analyze a situation while remaining completely calm.

"Say, Pax... What do you think about studying tactics?" He brought up the subject casually.

"Really?!" Pax's entire face lit up in response. Gazell chuckled inwardly, thinking how that was the first age-appropriate response his son had given all day. "Actually, I was meaning to talk to you about that soon, Father! I've been interested in it ever since I began listening to you discussing them with your soldiers."

"I-I see. Well, in that case I'll talk to them about it and let you know when we decide anything."

"Thank you, Father!"

"Of course."

Pax bowed his head, which Gazell patted affectionately before resuming his journey to the sparring grounds.

"Master Gazell!" Desmond, House Anderson's butler, was waiting for him at the entrance.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"You're often here at this time of day, sir. I thought I might find you more quickly if I waited for you here than searching the rest of the grounds. Anyway, Master Gazell, someone from the Royal Army is here to see you."

"Very well. Let's go, then." He had his heart set on training some, but that would have to wait. This was a good opportunity for him to discuss Pax anyway, so he turned and headed for his study. "Oh, it's you two. Did something happen?" He was surprised to see his right-hand man, the lieutenant general Kreuz, and Verlys, his military advisor.

“We heard you had your eye on a promising student, so we came to recruit him for the army before anyone else got to him!”

“Well, that’s not possible. The student in question only just turned ten years old!”

“That’s precisely why we’re here. Putting all jokes aside, the first regiment has returned home from duty. I handed the reins over to the first captain and decided to drop by to update you on my way home. Verlys accompanied me.”

“I see... What did the first captain have to say?”

“Tweil doesn’t seem to be making any moves. Baron Messi has been conferred a peerage, and the former Count Ceyzan’s domain has been set up under his governance and is now functioning as such. It’s also been suggested that we adjust the number of patrols at the border to their former numbers. The particulars are all recorded in documents we sent to the capital, so you’re free to read them at your leisure. Also, a letter from Baron Messi arrived and I brought it for you to read.”

“Hm... I can’t comment until I read the reports. But what do you think, Verlys?”

“There are other kingdoms bordering us besides Tweil. I think it would be unwise to concentrate all our men in one spot and neglect the others.”

“I see. I understand your logic. I’ll hurry up and return to the capital and read the reports, and then I’ll make a decision.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’m thinking of bringing my son Pax along to the capital with me. Verlys, when you visit my residence there, could you start teaching him some military terms? Specifically involving tactics.”

“I think that depends on him...”

“Is there some sort of problem?”

“Forgive me for being forward, General, but there’s not a problem with Pax himself. I’m only wondering why you’re asking this of me at such a late stage?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Pax is already incredibly knowledgeable when it comes to military tactics.” Gazell gave Verlys a baffled look.

“Didn’t you know, General? Every time we come to visit, Pax and Verlys look over records from past battles and discuss them,” Kreuz added.

Gazell looked quite surprised.

“I always assumed he was asking me these questions under your direction, but apparently, that wasn’t the case...”

“I’m ashamed to admit this is the first I’ve heard of it. I see... So that’s what he’s been doing...”

“Pax’s arguments are quite interesting. I’m sure he’d love it if you joined us next time.”

“I never expected to hear that from you. But yes, that’s fine. You keep taking care of him, you hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“By the way, General... Just how much stronger do you intend to make the Anderson guard?” Kreuz said with a chuckle. Once again, Gazell seemed baffled. “First, you’ve got Pax, who Verlys claims has interesting discussions on military tactics. That man’s the strictest person I know, so that means the boy must be a very gifted tactician indeed. You also have this mysterious child you’re training. If you take yourself into account and then put those two in the mix, the House Anderson guard might become the strongest in the kingdom!”

“Hmm, you’ve got a point.” Gazell took a moment to envision Kreuz’s suggestion and felt his blood sing. He could put his daughter on the front lines, and his son would be in the rear to guide the troops with his strategies. He could then oversee the whole thing as the general. “Sounds quite interesting, indeed.”

Kreuz and Verlys laughed wryly at the general’s response.

“I’ll leave for the capital in three days. We’ll discuss what to do after that.”

“Yes, sir,” the two men answered in unison.

Once they left, Gazell again made his way to the sparring grounds. As he

walked, his conversation with Kreuz and Verlys ran through his mind. After he took care of the bandits who killed his wife, he had been thinking about letting the next generation take over. However, the possibility Kreuz brought up was so alluring, he almost felt it would be a waste to do so. His children were greatly talented, and their youth was blindingly bright. Merellis and Pax were so full of energy that it made him want to work harder.

“Guess I’ll get to training myself,” he murmured as he arrived at the sparring grounds. He let out a peal of laughter so savage that members of the guard tightened with fear nearby.

“Merry, there’s something I want to talk to you about. Come to my study,” my father said to me once I had finished my exercises and training. I wondered what it could possibly be.

I headed toward his study as he asked; it had been a long time since I’d walked through the mansion on a sunny day like today. On nice days, I trained outside, and when it rained, I completed my exercises in the indoor training rooms we had on the property. I had formal training two to three days a week. Since my father was so busy, I trained by myself on the other days. I focused on increasing my stamina, practicing my form, or other exercises that I needed to improve on from morning till night. I used to do those things with my brother, but lately he only did his basic exercises and then shut himself away in his room to study. He had a lot to learn as the heir, but it also seemed like he was studying military tactics. One day I told him not to work too hard or he’d collapse. In return, he laughed and said he could say the same thing to me, pointing out all of my scratches and cuts.

We had all been like this since Mother died. It was as if a piece of each of our hearts had been frozen and we were throwing ourselves into things to try to fill up the void left behind. For me, I dove headfirst into my training. I wondered how long it had been since I had laughed, really laughed, from deep in my belly. Despite all the time that had passed since Mother died, none of our wounds had healed, and now they were festering.

I walked into my father’s study and saw him there, a stern expression on his

face. "I'm sorry I took so long, Father."

"It's fine. Sorry to bother you during your training."

"It's all right. Was there something you needed to talk to me about?"

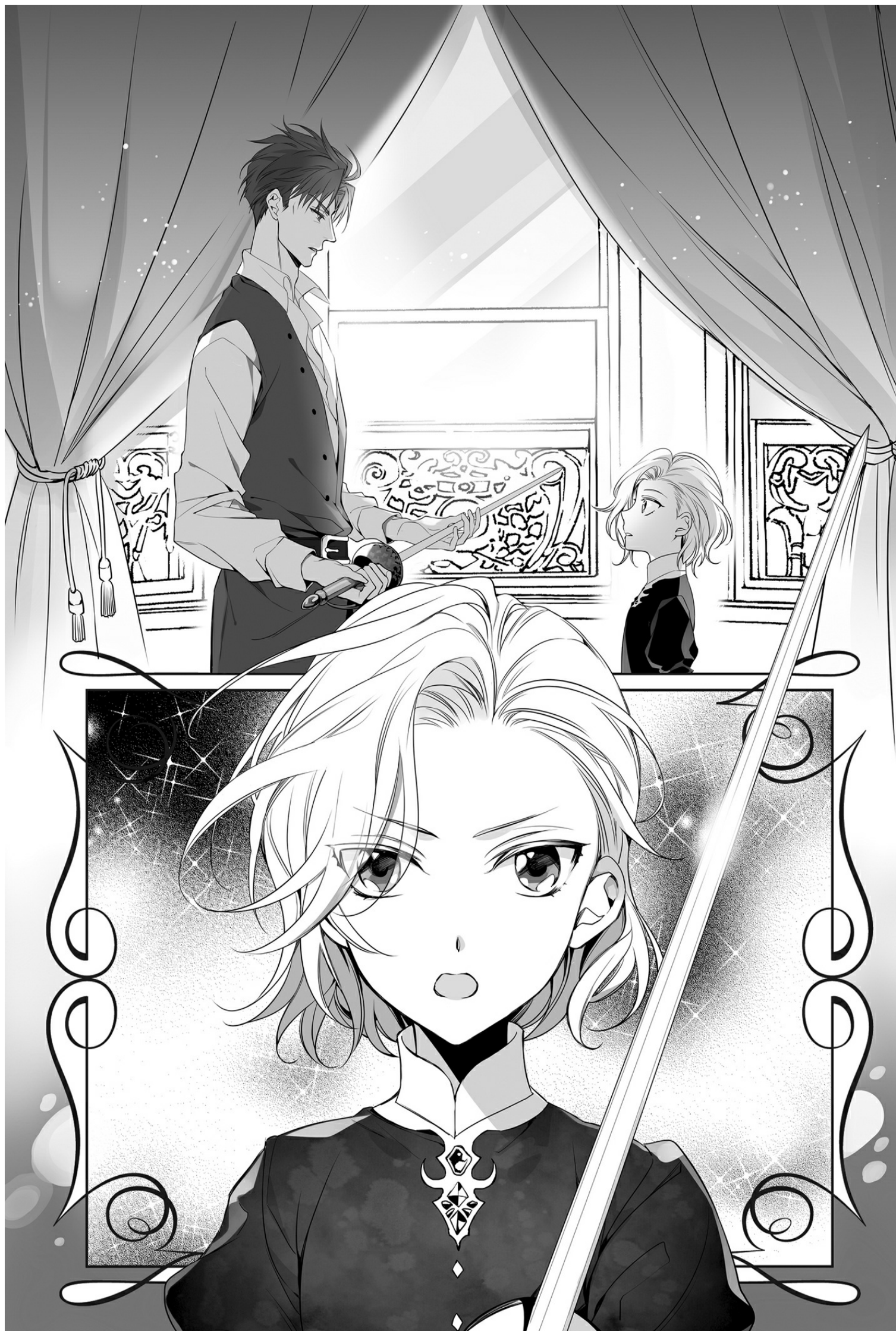
"Yes. I wanted to give you this." He handed me a sword. It was rather slender, but its tip carried a different weight than the blunt point of my training sword. The seal of House Anderson was engraved in the hilt.

"What's this?"

"I had it forged especially for you. Will you become a warrior worthy of this sword?"

I felt his gaze pierce right through me, sending a cold shiver down my spine. This was different from the swords I had used during any of my exercises. This one was a weapon specifically designed to hurt people. He was asking me if I was ready to wield such a thing. But why? No matter how favorably one tried to spin the things I had learned until this point, the truth was ultimately that all of those skills were used to hurt others.

"I'm sure you know this, Father, but the reason I picked up a sword in the first place was for my own revenge. Because of that, I cannot swear upon this seal, or upon our family name." I had no noble, lofty goals like using a sword to protect people. I learned how to wield it for my own sake. "But I vow on my name to take pride in the training given to me by my father and those who came before, and in the swordsmanship they have bestowed upon me. I vow to wield my sword with responsibility and to never besmirch that pride."



“Well said. Don’t ever forget those words.”

I sheathed the sword and bowed my head to my father.

After Father gave me the sword, I continued my daily training with my usual practice sword. I only used the real one occasionally to get accustomed to it. Once I thought about it, it seemed obvious that I wouldn’t have much chance to use it since I wasn’t an active duty soldier. Still, the fact remained that the gift in and of itself had inspired me even further to take my training seriously.

Father had left for the capital, but the guard was still here, so I was never short on sparring partners. They all had their own strengths, so even just watching them was a learning experience as I devised strategies to use against them in future matches. When my father came home, I took on his lessons with all my might. He was coming home more frequently lately, and more quickly than usual, as he traveled by horseback instead of carriage and with only a select few personal bodyguards.

Still, no matter how many times I sparred with Father, I couldn’t find a way to beat him. I still had a lot to learn. Each time I lost, all my shortcomings were thrust in my face once again...but that was exciting in and of itself. It forced me to think about how I could win in the future.

“Phew!” I returned to my room after my training that morning and wiped the sweat from my brow. It was just past noon.

“Lady Merellis! Lady Merellis!”

“Oh, Nana! What in the world is the matter?” Nana, the elderly housekeeper who had served our house for as long as anyone could remember, rushed into my room in a panic. She would often scoff and say things like “A noble’s daughter, not learning etiquette? Fiddlesticks!” However, she never really spoke out against my training itself. Instead, we had an ongoing battle of her begging me to take etiquette lessons, and I would refuse.

“You’re going to your etiquette lesson today if it’s the last thing I do!”

“But Nana, I have no intention of going to a tea party right now. I’d rather

train.”

“As a servant of House Anderson, I think your dedication is very admirable indeed. But, Mistress, you’ve received an invitation to a tea party!”

“Nana, you expect me to go somewhere looking like this? Write back and give them our usual excuse.”

When I started my training, I cut my hair short with a dagger, barely to my ears, so it wouldn’t get in the way. Nana was the first one to see me after I did it, and she let out a bloodcurdling scream. Every time it grew out, I cut it again. Nana would scream every time, but then she would use scissors to clean it up for me. To put it bluntly, I had a boy’s haircut. There was no way I could show up to a tea party looking like that, so every time I was invited somewhere, I instructed her to turn down the invitation.

There were *a lot* of invitations, since anyone and everyone wanted to be connected to the house of a hero. Perhaps it may have been better to attend a few parties for the sake of the family, but Father said, “Children don’t need to worry about such things,” so I took advantage of that.

But since we always turned down the invitations, at some point people started to believe that I was a sickly child. According to the rumors, I fell ill due to the shock of my mother’s death and had never recovered. I had struggled with my mother’s death, of course, but I certainly didn’t lead the life of someone who was ill. However, it was the perfect excuse for me not to attend. I used the rumors to my benefit and had Nana write back to decline with the reason that I was too sick. I assumed that would be sufficient this time as well, but...

“No, Mistress! This invitation is from the *queen*! It would be quite difficult to turn down, indeed...”

“The queen?” Why in the world would she invite *me* for tea?

“Yes! I know you’re worried about your appearance, but we can hide your scrapes and bruises with the right clothing. I’ve saved enough hair you’ve cut off to stitch together into a wig that should be passable...”

Nana had cut off all my escape routes. Although to be fair, there was no real

escape from an invitation from a member of the royal family.

“Well, better to make hasty preparations than to not be prepared at all... I’ll take those lessons now.” I knew that if I had to go, I didn’t want to do anything rude toward the royal family. And so began my crash course in tea party etiquette.

“Thank you so much for inviting me here today,” I said with a bow.

“No, you bowed at the wrong angle. And try to be more elegant with your motions.” My etiquette teacher demonstrated how I should move.

All this time, I didn’t even know we *had* an etiquette teacher in the household. But it was no wonder that I was surprised; my father largely ignored such things, and this was my very first lesson. My brother was a different story, though.

“Your smile is too stiff. Try again.”

My teacher clapped her hands loudly each time she corrected me. I let out an inward sigh, thinking that I would end up traumatized by the sound. I didn’t move as much as I did when I was training in combat, but my fatigue was overwhelming, even when I took a little break. I took it to mean that doing all these things I wasn’t accustomed to was more mentally exhausting than anything. I practiced my entrance over and over again, and finally, the day was over.

The following day, I had a lesson on how to drink tea. Now, I wasn’t normally a tea drinker at all. I was used to spending my days on the sparring grounds. I didn’t have time to sit around and drink tea with my pinky up.

“No. If you cut the bread like that, it will crumble!” She clapped her hands and corrected me.

“Take a smaller sip. Gulping it like that makes you look absolutely dreadful!”

Clap!

“Don’t cut the scone into such tiny pieces! Who would want to eat those crumbs?”

Clap!

“That doesn’t mean to cut it into huge bites either!”

Clap!

It didn’t matter what I did—she stopped me at every juncture. I couldn’t even count how many times she’d clapped her hands and made me freeze on the spot. This was just a tea party! A measly little tea party! But it was tea with the queen. Would I even be able to get through this? I felt like it was impossible.

“Mistress. Please don’t let your mind wander. Focus on the lesson, please.”

“All right...” I let out a sigh as my teacher glared at me, and I tried to concentrate once more.

Nevertheless, I soldiered on with my lessons and learned the absolute basics of proper etiquette before finally heading to the capital. I wore low-heeled shoes, hair extensions made from my own hair, and the most unusual thing for me of all—a skirt. I was certain I’d just be expected to quietly sip tea and answer any questions directed my way, but learning anything else from my training—er, *lessons*—just wasn’t possible in the amount of time we had. I was only just beginning to realize that high society etiquette was a lot more complex than it seemed to be.

I wondered how many years it had been since I last rode in a carriage like this. Lately, I had been practicing my horseback riding skills on the manor grounds. My mind flitted from one subject to another, and before I knew it, we were out of the Anderson family’s lands.

“What a peaceful landscape...” I murmured to myself, realizing I hadn’t had the time recently to stop and admire the scenery. My desire to become stronger consumed me. It was my only concern, day in and day out. Looking back on it, it almost seemed as if I were a girl possessed. I wondered if I would’ve taken a completely different path in life if Mother were still alive. I probably would have. I would’ve grown out of my tomboy stage and taken etiquette lessons regularly to truly become a young noblewoman, not the slipshod attempt at it that I was doing now. I laughed to myself as I imagined

this alternate reality.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Nana, who was sitting across from me, asked in a worried voice. The carriage had sped up suddenly.

“Shh, Nana!” I felt tension running through the bodyguards, and I clamped my hand over Nana’s mouth. I knew what had happened without even having to ask as I could feel the sheer malice in the air coming from our guards. I didn’t know who they were, but I knew we were being attacked. I looked out the window and received clear proof that my hunch was correct when I heard the distant but familiar sounds of swords clashing. “Calm down, Nana.” I tried to soothe her because she was trembling. I couldn’t blame her. Who wouldn’t be terrified upon being attacked? But my heart felt strangely calm. In fact, I trembled as I clutched my own sword—but out of excitement.

I could tell from the sounds that there were a lot of enemies. I normally felt uneasy without my sword, so I was glad I’d kept it within reach. I slowly pulled back the curtain and peeked outside. While the guards were busy fighting enemies, another group of attackers were heading straight toward the carriage.

It happened in a flash; one of them threw open the door. I automatically thrust my sword out with lightning speed, slicing the man’s neck open. Bright red blood spurted out, and its metallic scent filled the carriage. It was a reflex that I’d had hammered into my body, because when your life is in danger, you can’t afford to hesitate.

This was my first real battle, and yet I’d so easily decided to take that man’s life. For a moment, I stared at the now headless man. He wore simple clothing, unlike the members of our guard. I looked at his head. I didn’t know him.

And I killed him? Bile rose up in my throat, making me nauseated. But I snapped back to reality and jumped on the dead man’s horse. “What’s wrong with you all? You trained with General Gazell; you know better than to lose just because you’re outnumbered! Destroy them!” I yelled out, urging the guards who were overwhelmed by the enemy to act. They looked at me for a moment with surprise, but hearing my words, serious expressions came over them and they focused on their opponents again.

I tore off my hair extensions, tossed them aside, and readied my sword. Any

extra thoughts of mine fell by the wayside as I felt my senses sharpening. *Feel the enemy's breath. Watch their movements. Attack their weaknesses. Find that line between life and death and come out on the other side alive!*

My instincts were speaking to me from deep in my subconscious. My body moved just as I wanted to a pleasing degree. I had swung my sword tens of thousands of times, so much so that the metal was now a part of me. Its strokes cut through the wind, taking my enemies' lives.

As I fought, I realized there was no point in thinking about the “what-ifs” of my life. My sword was now a part of me, and my body was built to fight. I couldn't change the past. I had made my choice that day and had embarked down the path of battle. There was no sense in thinking about how the world would be had I chosen differently. My mother died, and I had chosen this path as a result.

Time kept moving forward. No matter how much you clung to it, no matter how much you turned around and looked—you could never get the past back. Every day was a result of the decisions you made as you moved ahead. There should be no regrets.

I suddenly realized I was alone. The landscape around me had become a sea of blood, littered with corpses. I looked around to see what was going on. The guards seemed to have defeated their opponents. There was only one enemy left, and he was horrified at the scene before him. He had no horse or other means to escape. When I looked at him, he let out a scream and backed away. He was apparently very scared of me. I snickered and pointed my sword at him.

“I-I didn't know! I didn't know her double was in the carriage! I didn't know!”

My, my. It seemed as if he had mistaken me for a ringer—a body double. I suppose it did make sense that no one would think me the daughter of an aristocratic family by the way I looked or moved. It was too much of a pain to explain the situation, but this might be a convenient excuse for me down the road.

“The mistress wasn't feeling well, so I came in her place. So? Are there more of you?”

“N-no...”

“I see. And why were you after my mistress?”

“I-I don’t know...!” He screamed. His face was tense. “I swear! I swear I don’t know why! W-we were just told the marquis’ daughter would be passing through here today, so...!”

“I think I need more evidence. You, over there. Take this man into custody and hand him over to Father in the capital. Inform him of what happened.”

“But what about you, Mistress?”

“I’m going home. Have Father tell the queen what happened. I’m sure Her Majesty will understand once she hears that I collapsed from fright.” I paused. “And I lost those ridiculous extensions anyway.”

Everyone already thought I was a sickly child, so it would be even more suspicious if I went ahead and attended the tea party as if nothing happened. I didn’t want to go in the first place. Even though I had done my lessons, I honestly didn’t want to appear at a tea party upon invitation from the queen as ill-prepared as I was.

I looked over at the carriage. It wasn’t ruined, but it was in pretty bad shape. The biggest problem was that one of the wheels was off its track.

“Nana, are you all right?” I went back to check on her inside the carriage. All the color was drained from her face.

“Y-yes...”

I clasped onto her trembling hand. I was sure the only reason she hadn’t passed out was because she had served in a military house for so long.

“That man said there aren’t any more of them, but we can’t be sure if that’s true. It’s too dangerous to stay here, so we need to go. Those two took the last enemy prisoner and will take him to Father. I’m sorry to ask this of you, Nana, but you’ll have to get on one of those horses.” I grabbed the reins. “Time to go.” That phrase was the fastest way to cut right to the point before I nudged my horse into a gallop. The rest of the guards, minus the two headed toward the capital, followed after me. In the end, I never went to the tea party in the capital that day; I returned home instead.

“Excuse me.” After a short pause, Gazell knocked and entered the room.

“Ah, Marquis Anderson. Sorry, but could you wait a moment? You over there, take these documents to get signed. This document here is fine, but send the other two back. These ones contradict each other. I don’t know if they were trying to cover up the truth by beating around the bush, but it’ll take at least a week with this much work for us to check. It’s fine to rush it, but can you at least make sure it aligns with reality?”

The man speaking was the lord of this room, Duke Romello Gib Armelia. He was the complete opposite of Gazell—he had soft, kind features and acted precisely as a nobleman should. He was the head of the most elite noble family in the kingdom and also the prime minister. But behind his gentle personality was a shrewd politician who knew when to be stern, like in moments such as these. The men he was ordering were all sparkling with excitement, and the others waiting in the room were listening intently without saying a word. They were clearly proud to be of any help to him at all.

“I want the rest of you to take the documents I assigned to you home, look them over, and come back tomorrow with suggestions.”

The men all bowed their heads and left the room. The only ones still remaining were Romello and Gazell. “Sorry that took so long,” Romello said in a casual tone you might hear at a local tavern. Any trace of the sternness from before had vanished.

“I never get used to how quickly your personality can change!” Gazell said with a chuckle, making Romello laugh heartily.

“Yeah? You seem a lot less surprised than last time.”

Gazell had seen him like this before by chance. A subordinate of his had invited him out to a bar at the edge of the capital city. He thought a man there looked familiar and was surprised to find it was Romello. He couldn’t believe that the head of one of the most elite noble families (and the prime minister, no less) was sitting there drinking among commoners!

“You seemed pretty shocked then too. Couldn’t even say my name!”

“I would’ve yelled it out loud, had you not come from behind and clamped your hand over my mouth! ‘I’ll explain everything later!’ you said.”

“Heh, what was there even to explain? You could see it was me, Romello Gib Armelia, right in front of you.”

“Do you usually wear a mask?”

Romello laughed in response to Gazell’s question, but then his gaze sharpened. The look was quite intimidating, despite the man’s friendly tone of voice. The general was silently impressed; no wonder he was the prime minister.

“Is there anyone in the capital who doesn’t wear a mask? It’s a demon’s lair! We spend every day scrutinizing each other, trying to wring out the truth and scheming about how to get ahead. Terrifying, really. My mask is just thicker than other people’s.”

“I see... Still, what were you doing at that kind of tavern?”

“Was it really that strange for me to be there?”

“I’m not sure I’d call it strange, but I was definitely surprised to see you there.”

“My father always told me to learn more about the average citizen. It’s the same as military tactics. Know your enemy. How can I govern the people if I don’t understand them? Ever since I was young, I made a point to go to different places in town and listen to what people were saying. Before long, I enjoyed it so much that I started talking more casually like them too!”

“Your father was a wise man. And so are you for listening to him. But at the same time, it’s frightening.”

Romello smirked in response. His lips were curled up in a smile not unlike a child’s after successfully pulling off a prank. From his perspective, if the battle was the government, then his enemies were everyone living in this kingdom except for the king. He knew all there was to know about the aristocrats, so he had chosen to study the commoners. Romello took that shrewdness of his and combined it with an uncanny knack for politics and learned about his enemy. Then, he’d have them in the palm of his hand without them even knowing

about it...

Or at least that's what Gazell thought, anyway.

"So? Why'd you come to see me today? Don't tell me you came all this way just to ask me that."

"Well..." Gazell trailed off, and Romello let out a sigh.

"I see... I thought you'd finally come to ask for my advice, but I guess that's just my own hubris."

"Advice?"

"General Gazell, I offer you my sincerest sympathies. If there is anything at all I can help you with, please don't hesitate to ask. And let me know when the bandits are apprehended."

"Oh!" That seemed to jog the general's memory, and Romello let out a dry chuckle in response.

"I knew you'd forgotten. It was a good thing I went to the tavern that night."

Gazell jolted in response. "Don't tell me you went to the tavern because you knew I'd be there?" It was just a hunch, but the way Romello spoke made it seem like it wasn't mere happenstance. He'd thought it was impossible, that surely it must have been a coincidence, and convinced himself that the reason why Romello was there was because he was just following the advice of his father to get to know the citizens better.

But he *was* standing right in front of him that evening.

"It's true that I go to that tavern often. I just told you that. But yes, hmm..." He chuckled wryly, a mischievous glint in his eye. "There are no coincidences in this world."

For a moment, Gazell was taken aback and stared at Romello. "But it's impossible. I only went there that day at the suggestion of my subordinate. It was a pure coincidence. Wait...were you the one who told him to invite me?"

"It would be pretty tough to convince those loyal subjects of yours to take you anywhere."

“Then how?”

“People act a certain way based on internal and external factors. Internal factors are things like their thought processes. You can predict things based on people’s personalities and the way they speak. On the other hand, external factors are things that happen around you. You can take all of these things into consideration and come to a conclusion,” Romello said this in a breezy tone of voice, but it gave Gazell goosebumps. He’d still be more apt to believe it was a coincidence. “It was easy to guess that you’d be there. You took that group of men out drinking before, didn’t you? I figured since it was the last day of training for that batch, you’d do it again.”

Gazell had trained many men during his time as the general. There were so many who wanted to join the army that he took them on in groups. And it was true that the group he’d trained before had invited him out for drinks on the last day of their training, but that only happened once, months ago. Obviously, as prime minister, Romello would know when soldiers joining the kingdom’s army would have their final day of training. But Gazell was startled to learn that he also knew they’d gone out drinking together.

“You must have eyes and ears everywhere!”

“A good prime minister always has tabs on his army, and as long as you weren’t hiding the fact that you were out drinking, people will talk. I happened to overhear it at the tavern. You’re famous, you know.”

“Still, I’m not sure how you found out. I went to a different tavern than last time.”

“If you go around enough places, eventually you’ll hit one frequented by knights.”

Gazell felt chills run down his spine. Was the man in front of him omniscient or something? It hadn’t been a guess at all; it was foresight. He took bits and pieces of knowledge and wove them all together to reach a conclusion. That was the kind of person this kingdom’s prime minister was.

“You went to all that trouble to help me?”

“Well, speaking from my position as the prime minister, I trust your judgment.

You're essential to this kingdom. You're popular among the citizens. Your very existence keeps other kingdoms in check. The negotiations with Tweil went smoothly all because of you. Everyone in the kingdom loves you, and we can't afford to lose you."

"The kingdom loves me, eh?"

"Yes."

"I know how powerful you are. I'm asking you this because I know that—but what will you do to help me? Pardon me for saying this, but I don't think you have the strength to fight."

"It's true. Even that daughter of yours could beat me."

Gazell froze when he heard that. There was one surprise after the other today, and he wasn't getting used to it. Just how much did the prime minister know, anyway?

"You jest. My daughter couldn't fight anyone with her sickly constitution."

"Oh? She couldn't even fight off a group of bandits?" Romello said boldly, laughing from his belly. Gazell saw this and let out a sigh.

"Just for future reference, how *did* you find out? The official story is that my daughter's body double is the one who defeated the bandits."

"First of all, consider the distance from the capital where she was attacked. You should put bait either beyond or right next to you as that's the most effective method if you have one piece of bait acting alone. However, the decoy was placed in a position where she would've just *barely* made it to the tea party at full speed. Would you really put your 'sickly' daughter in such a position?"

"What's the second reason?"

"Instinct."

Gazell laughed for the first time today in response. "That answer's not something you'd usually say."

"I agree with you. But...it's based on something I saw with my own eyes, and then felt. That's what made me certain."

“My daughter’s never left the march, though.”

“I went to your wife’s funeral, remember?”

“Oh...”

“I got chills. She was staring straight ahead, feeling hopeless about the senselessness of reality. But I saw the flames of strength in her eyes, vowing not to bend to it.”

Gazell listened to Romello, his expression softening. He had felt the same thing.

“Now, I’m not one to judge her strength as a fighter, but I’m certain that your daughter did not become sickly ‘because’ of her mother’s death. In fact, she’s strong enough to defeat any illness and come out on the other side. If she were a boy, I would love to train her to work for me.”

“But you already have a son.”

“Yes, I’d train her right alongside my son. The two of them together would do amazing things. But, of course, that’s just a pipe dream.”

“That’s right. She’s a girl, after all, but most importantly, I’m eager to see how much I can grow her skills as a warrior. I can’t give her up to you.”

“Heh heh. I thought you would say as much. We got off track there, but yes, I don’t have the strength to fight in a military sense. However, I think I’m a pretty strong politician, and I can give you the backing to make it easier for you to do what you want to do. If you team up with me, not only can we get rid of the bandits, but we can destroy every last person who gave them support as well.”

“They have supporters?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t looked into it that far yet? In that case, I won’t tell you until you say you’ll team up with me.”



“Heh... Ha ha ha!” Gazell laughed from deep in his belly. It was a laugh so powerful that it shook the furniture in the room. “Interesting, very interesting indeed. I never expected you to lend me a hand on my quest for vengeance. Is it correct for me to assume that you’ll make things easier to pave the way for me? And I don’t have to hold back at all?”

Gazell felt a deep satisfaction well up inside of him. Being able to utilize his full power on the situation and not have to worry about the resulting consequences would be a wonderful thing. He had to laugh at himself; he only now realized he was just a solitary soldier, but it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to go on a rampage on the battlefield as the general. He was excited at the prospect of being able to fully call the shots. In times of peace, the title of general did nothing but make him feel shackled. It was his job to negotiate with all the various ministries. Everyone wanted a piece of his glory, whether it be the kingdom or the people around him. He was right in the thick of it, even though he shunned high society. You had to make sure not to fall for the insincere smiles of those taking advantage of you and instead find the things that you could use to your advantage. Privately, he thought the idea was absurd, but he couldn’t just run away from it all because of his subordinates.

Gazell standing at the forefront would help things go smoothly for his subordinates too, but he wasn’t aware of that at that moment. At any rate, all those things made it difficult for him to take action.

“Of course. And since we’re finally teaming up, the first order of business is for you to stop being so polite with me all the time.”

“Sorry! All right, then... I’m counting on you!”

“You got it.”

And that was the beginning of a close alliance between the prime minister of Tasmeria and the general of the kingdom’s army.

Chapter 2:

The Future Duchess Experiences a Setback

CLANG, CLANG! The sound of clashing swords rang out.

“That’s enough! The winner is...Das!” The instructor loudly shouted my opponent’s name.

I sighed as I sheathed my practice sword and left the sparring grounds. I was doing my usual training regimen, but my surroundings were different. I was at the Anderson manor in the capital, not back at the march. After the bandits attacked us, I sneaked over to our manor here because I had to continue acting the part of my body double. Meanwhile, the “real” me was said to have fainted from the shock of the attack and was recovering in the countryside of the Anderson lands.

In reality, I was staying in the capital, swinging my sword. I didn’t mind, though. That was because, in the capital, I could continue training with the House Anderson guard, but soldiers from the kingdom’s army *and* the knights joined in on Father’s sessions as well. I could have much more variation in my sparring matches here. All the new discoveries I was making were very enjoyable. I couldn’t stay in my own room here since I was pretending to be, well, *not* me, so I was staying in a guest room. That meant that I was getting used to taking care of myself without the servants’ help. I felt like I was getting even farther away from living life as the daughter of a marquis.

Meanwhile, I was unsure of my father’s motives behind all of this. Why did he make me come to the capital in the first place? I was puzzled by the way he was acting lately. I had no idea why, but for some reason, he had been in extremely good spirits since the bandit attack. It almost seemed like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, and he was acting like his old self again. It was a good change, so I suppose it was all well and good, but...

It had been a long time since I’d seen him laugh out loud with his men. He wasn’t the only one who had changed, though. I had as well, because the day

the bandits attacked was my first *real* fight. It wasn't a controlled sparring match. It was a real, life or death fight. I would never forget that moment.

I didn't have an appetite for a while after the incident. Sometimes, I would suddenly feel like it was hard to breathe, and there were nights where I couldn't sleep. At times my blood felt so hot it was like it was boiling in my veins, but deep in my subconscious, I felt eerily cold. Those sensations made me so anxious that I would start to tremble uncontrollably. The odd feelings were deep inside of me and wouldn't leave. And despite that—or maybe *because* of that—I was off my game lately. I lost today's match, just like all of the others I had fought in recently. My body couldn't keep up with the image I had in my mind of how it should move. This had put me on edge. I was still too weak, and it was a problem. After all, I was complaining about things not going how I imagined them—that was weak in and of itself.

I balled my hands into fists, cursing myself.

“Hey, Mer! Get over here.”

“Ah, coming!” One of the senior soldiers called out to me and I followed him. Everyone called me by this nickname now, so I was used to it. I felt everyone's eyes on me like daggers as I trailed behind him. I let out an inward sigh. This was exactly how it had been when I first started training with the guard back in the march, but it was even worse here. I was sure the fact that I was half their size was part of it. They were certainly wondering what the general was thinking, training a weak little girl like myself when he had grown men falling over themselves for the chance.

But the reactions that hurt the worst were the glares from the aristocratic knights. Since they thought I was a body double and bodyguard for the general's daughter, that meant I must be a commoner. The knights hadn't spent much time with those of lower social status, and they were greatly displeased with the idea of sparring with one. The soldiers from the army weren't happy about that, and neither was I. However, there were many others, like the general's close aides, that had taken an appropriate attitude toward the situation. Surely, I wasn't the only one who was trying to fit in and not make ripples.

After I was finished with my training for right then, I went back inside the house.

“Mer, the master wants you to go say hello to his guest.” Nana greeted me at the door. I was about to answer when she came closer and whispered into my ear. “The young master is already in the parlor.” She was the only servant here who knew that I was not actually a body double. Even though she’d been through a horrible experience during the attack, she was still serving me as best she could. I was truly grateful for Nana.

My mind was filled with those thoughts as I made my way through the unfamiliar corridors of the manor. I wondered just who the guest could be. When I entered the parlor, I saw my brother there and an older man, sitting with his back to the entrance.

“Uncle!” I exclaimed.

“Oh! Hey there, little girl. I’m playing with your brother here, so wait just a minute while we finish up.” My uncle turned briefly toward me and then directed his focus back to my brother. I could see that they were playing a board game, and by the look on his face, my brother was losing.

I stared at the board, but I had no idea what was going on. I wasn’t very good at games in general, but the two of them liked playing quite difficult ones together. Also, I should note here that although we called this man “Uncle,” he was not related to us by blood. His name was Romello, and my father introduced him to us as his best friend. They had apparently met at a tavern and hit it off. He came to visit Father from time to time to chat, and when he did, he would play a game or two with my brother as well.

Although Uncle Romello was a commoner (or perhaps *because*), I got along with him very well. I could tell that the same went for him and my father. At first glance, he seemed like an ordinary man. He was handsome, but he didn’t really stand out because of the way he dressed and spoke.

My brother resigned and accepted his loss.

“Hey now, kid! You gave that one up way too easy. You still could’ve won if you’d done *this*.”

“Argh!” My brother groaned with frustration after Uncle Romello pointed out his fault.

“The diagonal was a bad move. If you’d gone here, I wouldn’t have been able to protect myself. And if you’d done this, well—that would’ve made for a good match! You always pick the toughest path when doing something else could be much easier for you. You actually did the same thing two weeks ago when we played.” He continued giving my brother advice, and the boy listened intently, hanging on to Uncle Romello’s every word. This particular board game had its origins in military tactics, and my brother started playing it after beginning his studies in that area. He kept getting better and better until he was even able to beat some adults. His victories had included all of the people who came to practice with him, and he could beat actual tacticians about two-thirds of the time.

The only one who could consistently win and knock him down a few pegs was Uncle Romello.

“Well? Are you satisfied now, boy?”

“Yes, I am. I’ll review our matches over and over until the next time you come visit.”

“You do that. You get better every time I visit, so these are pretty fun for me!” He laughed heartily. My brother grinned in response, burning with competitive spirit. I always felt captivated by his enthusiasm when he got that look in his eyes.

I’d never seen him so obsessed with something. Perhaps it was because ever since Mother had died, he’d been focused on becoming a good heir for my father. He had always excelled at everything he did, so it was unusual to see him lose and get frustrated. But he seemed different today. He seemed like he was truly having fun, like he had when he was a little boy. And that made me happy too, although I was surprised at what he said.

When he said he would review their matches, he played out every move over and over again, examining where he went wrong and what he could’ve done instead. In other words, he was able to memorize every single move of every single match he’d played. My brother’s brain was just built differently from

mine. It seemed that Uncle Romello was the same way.

“Why did you start playing that kind of game, Uncle?”

“Hm? Why, because it’s fun.”

“You should become a tactician. I know I’m biased, but someone who’s good enough to beat my brother could be a very fearsome one!”

“Real battle and a board game may be similar in some ways, but they’re very different, little girl.” Uncle Romello toyed with a game piece.

“Are they?”

“They sure are. The board is flat. There are rules about how you can move the pieces. You know what I’m getting at, don’t you, boy?”

“You need a three-dimensional point of view on the battlefield.”

“Could you give me an example?”

“Well... You have to take into consideration the climate, the topography, the makeup of the troops, and the soldier’s own abilities. And the same goes for the enemy.”

“Exactly. You have to know the battlefield, from top to bottom. You must know yourself and your enemy. And before the battle even starts, you must think about what the conflict will achieve and what you must prepare... Of course, this game is a good tool to begin learning those things. But...” Uncle Romello placed the piece he was holding onto the board and then tipped it over. “Sometimes there are people so strong that they can destroy all your plans, just like that. Strong people like your father.” He gave a slight chuckle and then let out a sigh.

“I still think you’d make a good tactician, Uncle.”

“I’ve already found my battlefield. Drinking booze is a war in and of itself! Isn’t that right, Gazell?” he said, tipping back his cup.

“That’s right. A battle you can’t withdraw from, that’s for sure.” Then my father tipped back his own cup. “Speaking of which, let’s pour another round. This bottle’s empty.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The two of them laughed boisterously and refilled their glasses. I suddenly felt like our whole conversation was a waste. My brother quickly switched seats. *Oof, no wonder.* The smell of the alcohol was horrible.

“If you keep that sour look on your face, the god of good fortune won’t smile upon you, little girl.” My uncle reached over and tousled my hair. “If you’re always that tense, your nerves’ll be shot when it really counts. How ’bout you join us for a drink?”

“I’m a child, Uncle.”

“I’m joking! Hah, your old man’d kill me if I tried that.”

“Yeah, I would.” Father glared at Uncle Romello, but he still had an amused look on his face. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched their exchange.

I wondered how long it had been since things had felt this lighthearted at home. A pang of nostalgia hit me, along with sadness over those days we would never get back. I felt my gaze soften, wishing times like this could last forever. But it wouldn’t be so—time kept marching on. The mirage of the past was too gentle, and lingering would dull my senses.

“Uncle? I’m glad you came over today. I hope you visit again soon,” I said after a pause.

I said my farewells to the happy scene and went to resume my training. That afternoon, I was scheduled to spar with the knights. I completed my usual regimen and then moved on to my sparring matches. My first opponent was a young knight that I had never seen at the Anderson manor before. I was looking forward to sparring with him because I heard he was a rising star among the rookies.

His swordsmanship was fast and sharp, befitting his reputation. Every time we crossed swords, I could feel him taking the upper hand. Before long, I got in too deep and was swept up in his pace, and not long after, he knocked my sword out of my hands. Seriously—what was wrong with me? My body just wouldn’t move the way I wanted it to. Even though I was aware of that fact, I couldn’t do anything about it.

“That’s enough! The winner is Donalti!” The instructor’s voice rang out.

I was so frustrated and ashamed of myself that I bit my lip.

“I had high hopes when I heard you were General Gazell’s favorite student, but that’s all you’ve got?” Donalti said with hostility. “Don’t let it get to your head. The only reason Master Gazell even took you on as a student is because of his daughter. You’re the same age and he needed to train a body double. That doesn’t change the fact that you’re nothing but a commoner. Someone like you has no business strutting around House Anderson looking so cocky.” He walked away from the sparring grounds, but I couldn’t say a thing back to him.

Honestly, there were so many comments I could make about what he just said. For starters, who in the world thinks that I’m the general’s favorite? Still, his words stabbed me in the chest like daggers. I couldn’t deny that I was born into a privileged existence because ever since I’d picked up a sword, I was able to train with General Gazell, the hero of everyone in the kingdom. There were scores of soldiers and knights who dreamed of doing what I took for granted every single day.

I was nothing without my privilege. It made me feel ashamed and frustrated. Maybe I *had* grown conceited. I thought I’d grown stronger—so strong that everyone around me recognized my talents. At least that’s how it seemed when the members of the House Anderson guard I trained with warmed up to me. But maybe reality was different. Maybe they just treated me nicely because they thought I was their master’s favorite.

Here in the capital, their jealousy was clear to me. I felt harsh glares on me as I trained, and now I had been defeated by Donalti. In fact, I hadn’t racked up a single win since I got here. I suddenly began to worry that the guard had been soft toward me; maybe they went easy on me and simply let me win back at home. My thoughts kept spiraling toward negativity. I knew I couldn’t sit here and cry, so I dusted myself off. I held my feelings in until I was done with my training, and then the moment I was finished, I left the grounds and went into town. I didn’t want to cry at home; no, I *couldn’t* cry at home. I didn’t want Father, or my brother, or even Nana to know. It wasn’t that I didn’t want them to know I was upset. But I couldn’t bear for them to know *why* I was crying. Call it a matter of my pitiful pride, if you will, but I didn’t have the courage to be

hurt any further.

I headed toward a tower located within the capital that my father had brought me to previously. The tower was guarded, of course, but they let me through as the guards were men who trained at our house and recognized me. I climbed the long stretch of stairs and finally arrived at the top. The view of the capital from the tower was spectacular. It was originally built as a lookout tower and it wasn't open to the public, so I was the only one up here who got to enjoy the beautiful view. I remember how I was so moved the first time I came up here...but now my vision was blurred with tears so I couldn't see it clearly. The moment I was finally alone, all of the emotions I had bottled up inside while I was training overtook me. I was swept up in them, and tears streamed down my face.

“Waaah... Waaaah!”

I was frustrated. I was embarrassed. I was pathetic. I felt like a clown. Whenever someone looked at me, they didn't see me—they saw my father. But I...

All the negative emotions weighed painfully heavy on my chest. Crying didn't lighten the load any—it even made it feel heavier. I was just about to open my mouth to let out a scream when all of a sudden, I heard a loud *clunk!*

“Who's there?!” My voice was harsh and accusatory as I called out to my invisible intruder.

“Who are *you*? Kids aren't allowed in here.” A boy emerged from the staircase. He looked like he was slightly older than me.

“Doesn't look like you own the place.”

“I came here before with my dad for work, and since then I've been entrusted to keep an eye on this tower. So? Who are you?”

“M-my father's in the military. He brought me here before too. I know the guards, so...” I stammered awkwardly, not sure what to say. The boy I yelled at was here for a reason. I had none; I was being selfish because I'd wanted to be alone. And once again, the only reason why I was able to was because of my father. Here I was, feeling at a loss because of the gravity of my father's

presence, ashamed and crying because I was too weak to use my own wings to fly out of his nest...but I was *still* using his name. Once I realized that, those red-hot emotions inside of me that were threatening to explode suddenly cooled.

“Oh, so that’s how you got in here, huh?”

“I-I’m sorry. I came here for personal reasons, but I was rude to you. I’ll leave right away.”

“Wait...” I stood up to go, but he stopped me. “I was trying to make myself sound important earlier. I wasn’t formally entrusted to watch over this place or anything like that. I just like the view up here, and my dad lets me come up here under the condition that I let him know if anything’s amiss. It’s not a big deal, and that’s why I have no right to blame you for being up here either. I was just panicking a bit thinking what a headache it would be if you’d just sneaked up here to have an adventure or something, because if that was the case, the guards must’ve been sleeping on the job...”

Oh, great, I’ve even caused trouble for the guards! As that thought crossed my mind, I felt like I was the one getting a headache.

“I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry for basically sneaking up on you without saying a word,” he said.

“It’s not your fault. I just...” After that, I told him about myself, and told him about the story my father came up with about me being a body double. As I spoke, he came over and sat down right next to me and quietly listened.

“I’m not surprised they said that to you,” he said after I was finished.

I knew it, I thought. Once again, the truth weighed like an anvil on my chest.

“What’s the point in crying so much about it? You’re privileged and that’s a fact, right? And what that man said to you was also true. Although it’s complete nonsense that’s not even worth listening to.”

“How could it be nonsense if it’s a fact?”

“Because it’s a *fact*. Facts are things that have happened that are undeniably true. It’s a fact that he said those things—but they were based on his subjective opinion. Nothing more than his interpretation of you learning swordsmanship

from your father.”

“I don’t get what you mean...”

“In other words, he’s just jealous. He’s using the facts to bolster his own emotions. You can’t let things like that bother you or it’ll never end.”

“But it’s true that I’m just not good enough.”

“So what?” I had no idea what to say in response. “It’s fine to be embarrassed that you’re not strong enough. But there’s no need to just lie down and give up. Just keep focused on moving forward in order to reach your goal. What’s so bad about using everything you’ve got now? Don’t worry about someone’s petty jealousy.”

“Keep moving forward...”

“That’s right. Why are you training in the first place? There should be some reason why you absolutely can’t give up or else you should quit. Because guys like that are everywhere.”

His words really hit home with me. He was right—I did have a clear goal. I had something I wanted to achieve, no matter how painful it would be, and even if there was nothing to be gained from it. Something precious was taken from me, and that was unforgivable. And I would get my vengeance, no matter what. That’s the decision I’d made. That was exactly why I had left the room earlier and turned my gaze away from the warm, cozy scene. So what if I was weak? I just needed to get stronger. So what if the people around me didn’t recognize my talents? Recognition wasn’t what I’d been after in the first place.

My goal this entire time was to get stronger so I could get vengeance. Once I remembered that, it was like my vision was crystal clear.

“Thanks. I feel much better.”

“Do you?”

“Yes... It was really valuable advice.”

“Well, I tell those same things to myself all the time.”

“I guess we’re the same, then.”

“I guess so.”

I stared at him. The boy had a handsome face, but he had a sharp presence to him that made him seem more frightening than beautiful. Just looking at his body, it didn't seem like he was trained to fight. I could definitely take him in a match...so why did I have a feeling that I couldn't beat him?

“My name is Merry. I'm not sure if we'll ever see each other again, but it's nice to meet you.” For some reason, I introduced myself not by my real name but by the nickname my father liked to call me.

“I'm Louis. Nice to meet you.”

And then we shook hands.

I swung my sword once more. After I finished practicing my form, I recalled the way Donalti fought and tried to ready my body to fight him again.

I couldn't reach his level. Once again, I felt frustrated by my loss to him. As I wiped the sweat from my forehead, men from my father's regiment began to show up to train.

“You're here awful early.”

I realized Father was standing next to me.

“General Gazell! Good morning!” Since we were outside, I greeted my father as his daughter's bodyguard.

“Mm, morning. How 'bout a match with me?”

“I'd love to! Thank you.”

I picked up my practice sword so we could spar together. The *thunk* of our swords clashing resounded through the sparring grounds. But since I couldn't beat him in a match of strength, I quickly fell back.

“The way you swing your sword has changed,” my father mused during our match. “You have good swordsmanship and are treating your matches like real battles. But...I can feel your hesitation.”

“Hesitation?”

“Yes. You’re looking for an opening, but then you stop right before you strike. It’s dulling your swordplay, and your indecision creates opportunities for your opponents.”

Dulling my swordplay? It was true that I didn’t have enough control over my body lately, and I’d felt that something was off. I wondered if that was the cause.

“Maybe you’ve grown afraid to swing your sword after being in a true battle where lives were lost. I suppose that’s natural and is why I’ve allowed it until now.” My father knocked my sword out of my hands. “But if you’re going to keep this up, then you need to give up your sword.”

His gaze was cold. It stabbed through me, sharp as a knife, as if he were looking down on me. His words cut me even deeper. My father’s face was so serious it was frightening.

“When it comes down to it, swords are tools for killing. When you hold a sword in your hand, that means you have to be prepared to take someone’s life or to possibly be killed by someone else. Didn’t you already tell me you were ready for that the day I gave you that sword?”

“You did...”

“If you’re gonna let this experience crush you, then give it up. And don’t ever step foot on these grounds again.”

The air was thick with tension. And then the next moment, my father swung his sword toward me. I dodged it. He was different from usual. He had an intensity about him that was almost painful. “What’s wrong with you?! Is that all you’ve got?! What happened to being ready?”

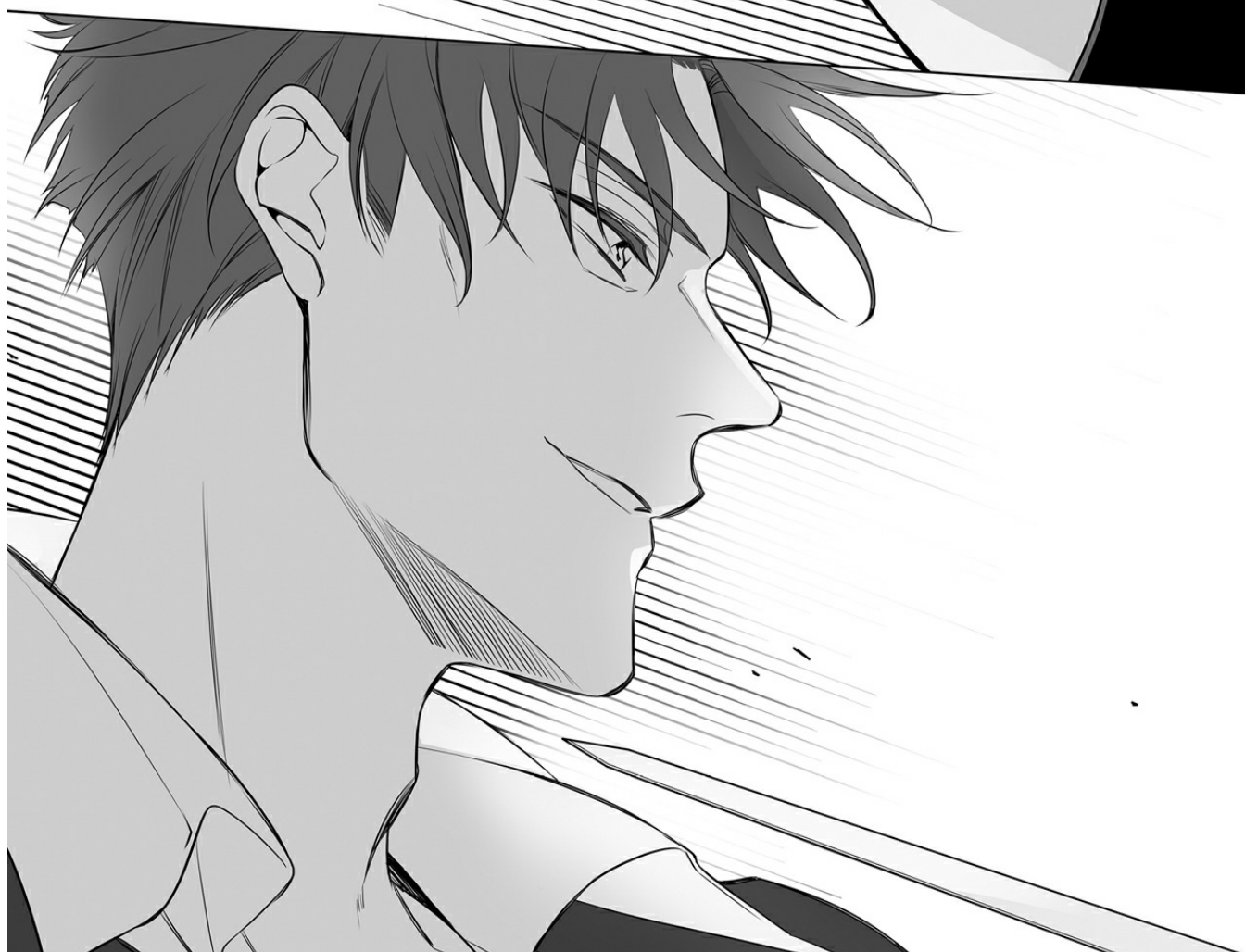
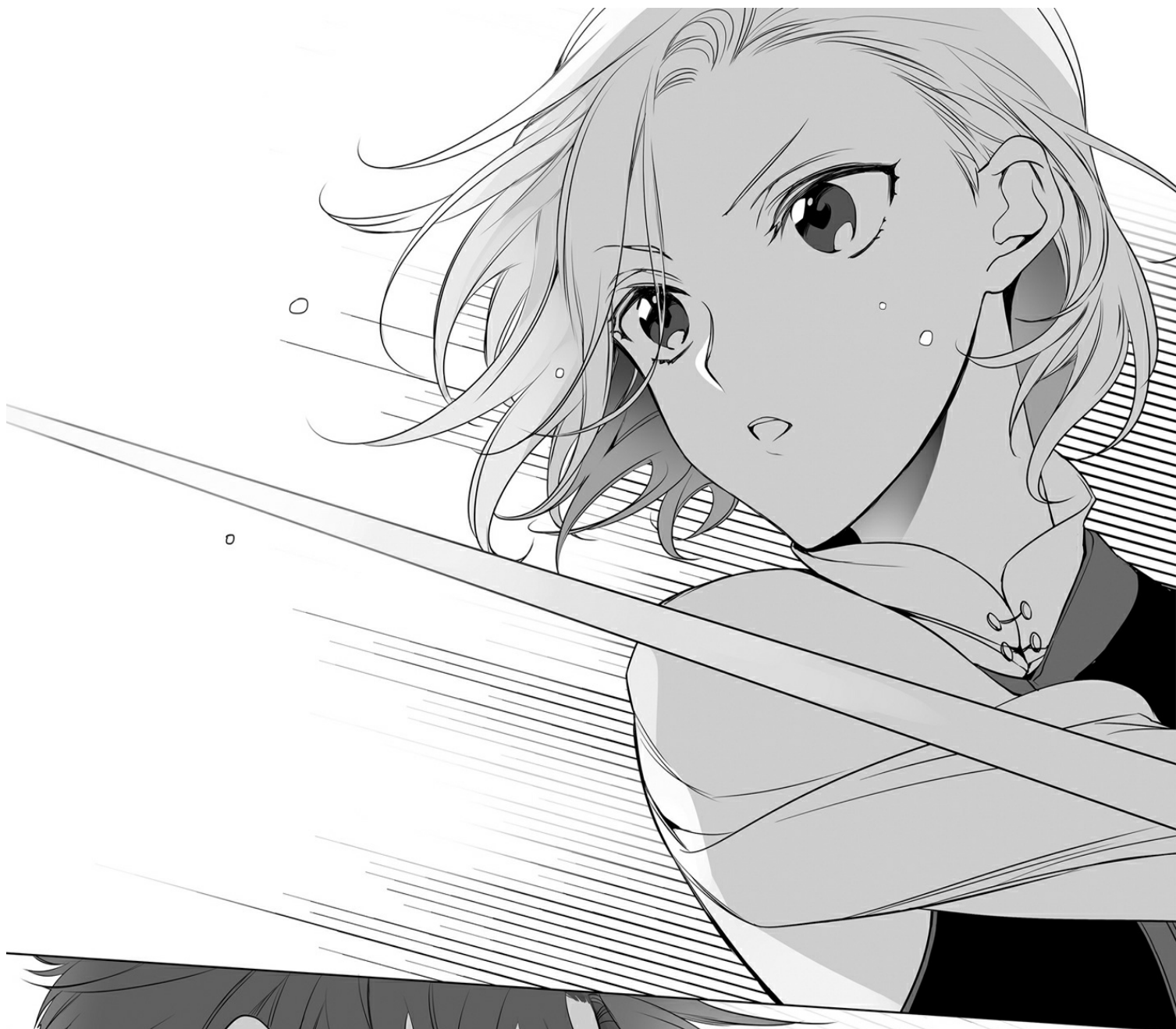
I didn’t pick up my sword from the ground. I just continued to dodge my father’s sword. His angry voice felt like it was stabbing through my skin. I was... afraid. Was this really the extent of my determination? Was everything I’d learned, all the hard work I’d done until this point, really going to crumble just like that?

No.

No, no, no!

I swore that I wasn't going to let this senseless world beat me. I swore that I was going to get vengeance on all the people who stole my mother from me, no matter what else I had to give up or even if there was nothing to gain at the end of it. I hadn't gone into this with any kind of naiveté, thinking that I would do my best and then giving up with a smile when it got too hard. I was going to break through my own ego, using everything around me if I had to. I was going to achieve my goal, no matter what.

I reached for my sword and decided that I could not let my father beat me here. At long last, my body finally began to move exactly how I imagined it in my head. My father's movements seemed slower—no, everything in the world around me seemed to move more slowly than usual. I glided into my father's space, and my sword finally connected with his.



His response to my movements were delayed, and his sword easily flew out of his hands. I took that opportunity to aim my sword at his neck.

“There. You’ve shown me your determination now.” Hearing that, I withdrew.

“Thank you, General Gazell. You made me remember something very important.” I thanked him with a smile, then went back to the house to wash off my sweat.

“Oh, you’re here early.”

“Good morning, Kreuz,” I greeted the man. He was a caring person who always seemed concerned about me. He was my father’s right-hand man, and he was strong in his own right. Although he had a stern face and a big, muscular body, he was actually very kind.

“Mm, you’re looking better today. Yesterday you looked pretty rough, but you seem much improved now.”

I paused before answering him. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

“Don’t let it bother you. I just took it upon myself to worry about you, that’s all.” He patted my head. It was a natural gesture, and his hand was very warm.

Before long, it was time to start basic training. It consisted of simple conditioning exercises to warm up your body and improve your stamina. The knights didn’t usually participate in the exercises, so there weren’t many people here. Even though the motions were the same as what I had done back home, I couldn’t keep up at first. Over time, I gradually got the hang of it, and now it was like second nature to me. Today was better than yesterday. Tomorrow will be better than today. I improved bit by bit, and little by little, I mastered the things I couldn’t do previously.

In other words, everything that led up to this point hadn’t been wasted at all. I felt like the reason I was so optimistic was because I met that boy Louis yesterday.

After my conditioning exercises were done, it was time for sparring matches once more. The knights would participate from here on out, but for some

reason, Donalti wasn't here today. That was fine, though, as I was sure I'd face off against him again sooner or later. I just had to keep getting stronger to prepare for it. Stronger than I was now. I let out a small laugh when I realized that the thought of it excited me.

How strong would I have to get before I could beat him? How much stronger would I be able to get, period?

The more I thought about it, the more pumped up I got. I was still feeling that way when my name was called, and I stepped into the ring. My match was about to begin. My body felt light, my mind was clear, and I could move exactly how I wanted to. It was just like it had been when the bandits had attacked us.

"The winner is Mer!" The instructor's voice rang out before I knew it. The match was over much quicker than I'd expected, and I felt a bit dissatisfied as I sheathed my sword and left the ring.

"Hey," Kreuz called out to me as I wiped my sweat from my brow. "You were great today."

"Thank you! I'm honored to hear you say that, Kreuz." I smiled and thanked him.

But for some reason, Kreuz was frowning and had a strict look on his face. I almost laughed at the sharp contrast in our demeanors. "For Heaven's sake. I thought you looked better today, but your swordsmanship was so sharp and clear. Nah, that's not the best way to describe it..." He trailed off, his expression even more serious and stern now. "Hey, could I ask you something? Though it might be hard for you to answer..."

"Maybe."

"Why did you take the sword?"

"I don't remember taking a sword from you..."

"Not like that! I meant why did you start learning how to use a sword?"

I wondered why he was asking me that, but it wasn't as difficult a question as he thought.

"Because my mother was murdered," I answered frankly. Even though all I did

was answer his question, he gave me a surprised look. “Did I say something strange?”

“No...” He paused for a moment as if he were speechless. “I was just wondering why a little girl like you had started learning how to use a sword, that’s all. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I replied in a light tone of voice.

“Isn’t it, though? I’m a soldier, and I just heard about one of our citizens not being protected. I can’t forgive myself for that, even though I know that realistically speaking, it’s impossible for me to be able to protect everyone. Anyway, sorry to keep you.”

Just then, my father called for everyone to assemble, so it seemed as if the sparring matches were done for the day.

“It’s fine.”

The two of us then began walking toward my father.

“Excuse me, General. May I have a few minutes of your time?” Kreuz asked as he stepped into the room.

“I just finished up with something. What is it, Kreuz?” Gazell smiled brightly at him, but Kreuz’s serious expression didn’t falter. In fact, the man’s face was so serious that it seemed like something was bothering him.

“I need to talk to you about Mer.”

“Mer? What about her?” Gazell’s face turned serious at the mention of his daughter.

“Well, I suppose it’s more about you than Mer. What do you plan on doing with her?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Today... I thought she was frightening, a little girl like her fighting in that sparring match.”

“She’s a great talent, is she not?”

Kreuz smiled wryly. “I felt something different in her mood right before the match began. An intense feeling of malice, like one would feel on a battlefield. I just couldn’t believe something like that was coming from such a little girl.” He didn’t say it in a good way or a bad way—he just relayed the things he felt to Gazell. “Once the match started, she swung her sword like she was actually intending to kill her opponent. Her defense was on a razor-thin margin, heedless of danger. She lunged into her opponent’s space without hesitation. She fought as if she actually *enjoyed* the risk of possibly losing her life. No—it was as if she would willingly lose her life.”

To put it simply, he was afraid of her. That was why he always looked so serious when he spoke with Merellis, and why sometimes he found himself at a loss for words. He was a soldier in the kingdom’s army, so of course he’d been in life-threatening situations before and had taken the lives of others on the battlefield. But even still—or maybe *because* of that—he was afraid of her. Her cutting malice was so sharp it was like the girl was a blade herself. Her fighting style was just the same. She had something mysterious about her, like she was from another world or something. Her strange qualities made him afraid, but at the same time, he was in awe of her.

How much time and determination had it taken her to achieve that at such a young age?

“That’s just how Mer is.” Gazell said in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone. “Actually, ever since she got to the capital, she had lost all those qualities in her swordsmanship. What you’re seeing now is how she usually is.”

“Why did you start teaching her how to use a sword? I wonder if her talent is one that was best to let lie dormant. Because with that malice and determination...one wrong step and it could break her heart. Couldn’t you have her go down a more peaceful path?”

“It was my own selfishness,” Gazell said quietly. “I lost my wife when she was killed by bandits. The two of us went through similar experiences, and I have no right to stop her. Plus, I thought if she learned how to fight, I could make her my daughter’s bodyguard to ensure her safety.” He hadn’t even told his right-hand man the truth about Mer’s identity. “But she was even more talented than I imagined. I taught her basic form and stances and had her spar with me, but

she developed that style without me teaching it to her.”

“Why did she change once she got to the capital?”

“Right before she came here, she experienced a true battle. She got it back right after I set a fire under her, though.”

“So you’re the reason why she was able to fight today like she used to, even though she had a choice to give it up... How did it happen, when she was afraid of the sword?”

“She wasn’t afraid of the sword. She was afraid of her own ability.”

“Her own ability?”

“Yes, the ability to easily take someone’s life. Ever since she got to the capital, she seemed uncomfortable, unlike when she was in the march. I knew she could win if she swung her sword as she intended, but she was subconsciously holding back. I could tell when she was still doing it while she sparred with me. She could see herself possibly taking a life, so she was holding back. She was unable to see the soldiers I trained as enemies. Sorry if that offends you.”

“But...”

“As you said, she’s in a perilous state. She took up the sword prepared to abandon everything, even if it meant she gained nothing in return...in order to get her vengeance. The sword is everything to her.”

“But isn’t that even more reason why she should’ve been pushed toward another path?!” Kreuz yelled.

Gazell just smiled sadly. “I wish she would’ve.”

“Then...”

“But you’re underestimating her resolve. I did too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I intended on making her give it up, not encouraging her. I thought since her resolve was about to break, some harsh words would finish it off.” Within his mind, Gazell had silently screamed, *“Don’t pick up the sword! That’s enough!”* But she resisted. She had given Gazell such a look that he knew that her heart

would break if she *didn't* pick up a blade. "Her heart is barely alive. Her sword is everything to her, and she sees nothing else. She knows she might not gain anything from it, and yet she still chose it. She won't give up the sword, whether through force or anything else, and that was why her hesitation put her in danger. If she gets into the habit of holding back, it could create a pitfall for her. That's why she needs to continue wielding her sword. There's only one way for her to abandon this path."

"What's that?"

"Marriage."

Even if Gazell took revenge on the people who killed his wife, there would always be those who tried to harm her because she was the daughter of the marquis. That's what the duke of Armelia had implied to him. And even if he were right—no, as long as that possibility existed, Merellis would have to protect herself. The only time that would become no longer necessary was if she married and relinquished the title of "the hero's daughter."

"Could anyone rein her in, though? It would have to be someone interested in more than her beauty."

"You seem to know her well," Gazell laughed. "Honestly, I don't know. She would have to meet someone that was more important to her than her desire for revenge. You asked me before what I intended to do. My answer is nothing. I just want her to be herself, and to be happy. That's it. That's truly it, but perhaps that will be a difficult thing to achieve."

"That sounds like something a father would say."

"I think of myself as her father."

"I understand how you feel, General. I'm sorry for questioning you."

"It's fine. Keep watching over her from now on, all right?"

Kreuz bowed his head, agreeing.

I stared at the view below me. Ever since the day I lost to Donalti and cried over it, I grew fond of going to the top of that tower after training and taking in

the sights.

“You seem on edge again today.”

“Do I?”

I thought I sensed someone nearby, and I was right—it was Louis. I’d wondered if I would ever see him again, but I hadn’t thought it would be this soon.

“I think it’s because I decided to be honest with myself,” I answered.

“Hmm...” He murmured and sat down beside me.

“Is there something in particular you want to accomplish?” I asked out of curiosity. “Last time I saw you, I just talked about myself. I want to know more about you. You said that you grew up privileged too, right? But you didn’t break. I was wondering if you had some kind of goal as well.”

“Do you think that tomorrow will always be the same as today and that it’ll come no matter what?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course not.” Louis gave me a surprised look as I spoke. “My mother was killed even though I never doubted, never even considered that there’d be a day when my family was taken away from me. You never know what’s going to happen in life.”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I’m hiding it. So? Go on.”

“My father took me to the graves of the soldiers who lost their lives in the war with Tweil. There were so many names, and the graveyard stretched on and on. The names of countless soldiers who fought to protect the people of this kingdom.”

“Oh...”

Before my father, the hero, joined the war efforts, the situation in the kingdom was dire. Many citizens and soldiers perished in the fight.

“I met soldiers who were wounded in battle as well. Even though they were injured for the sake of our country, many weren’t getting enough care for their

wounds. On my father's orders, that situation seems to have been resolved, but I just realized a lot of people sacrificed their lives so we could have peace. Somewhere out there, I'm sure there are still people paying for it. Do they think they're doing it to protect the kingdom? I'm not sure anyone sees that bigger picture. They only fought to protect the things precious to them." Louis cast his gaze out the window. "They have people who are important to them, who also have people who are important to them. Just like the people in Tweil do. When you have a big group of people gathered together, you can create a kingdom. It's difficult to listen to the stories of every single person in the kingdom, but I want to protect it so that they can all live their lives free of worries. I want to use my intelligence to protect their peaceful way of life. I want to carry on the wishes of those who sacrificed their lives and honor them. That's what I thought, anyway."

"Protecting the kingdom..." Honestly, I didn't understand those feelings. In fact, it made me sick. "Then why didn't you pick up a sword?" I truly meant it. Why was it necessary to protect others? Strength was everything. Being weak was a crime in and of itself. I hated the people who used weakness as a shield because my father had to protect those people. And because he had to be away to do that, he, no, we had the most precious thing in our lives stolen away from us.

If you're strong, do you get hurt? If you're strong, do you not cry? If you're strong, can you do anything? Of course not. So then why should strong people save the weak? The weak should just become strong, and then they can protect themselves. Why should the strong be responsible for the weak?! I didn't understand. That's why I was genuinely surprised when Kreuz apologized to me. I couldn't understand why he did that. I loved the soldiers because they were strong, but honestly, I didn't understand why they worked so hard to polish their craft all to protect someone else.

"It's not just about maintaining the peace. It's about creating an environment where people can live without worries. That's the most important thing. If you go about it the right way, you can protect the soldiers too. That's why I want to follow in my father's footsteps. Also...I'm really bad with a sword." He had no idea what I was thinking to myself and continued, "Why did you take up the

sword in the first place?”

“Because my mother was murdered. I’m going to send her murderers straight to hell, with my own hands.”

“Vengeance, then.”

“Yes.”

“I see...” He nodded and then quietly looked outside.

“I don’t understand wanting to protect others.” I followed his gaze out the window. “How can you even feel like that? I mean all those people you talked about...they’re complete strangers. Why would you work so hard for people who aren’t even important to you?”

“Because I don’t want to see those things anymore. That’s it. It’s just for my own self-satisfaction.” He smiled faintly. “What about you? What are you going to do afterward?”

“After?” I repeated, not understanding.

“After you get revenge.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. My goal is to get revenge. That’s why I’m working so hard refining my skills with a sword. That’s the reason I’m alive.”

“That’s a waste.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I glared at him. I could feel the irritation inside of me bubbling up to the surface.

“I’m talking about *you*. Your only goal is vengeance, but what happens after that? Maybe you’ll feel accomplished when you succeed. But if you put everything into one thing, there’s nothing after that. There will be nothing left.”

“I don’t care if I have everything to lose and nothing to gain. This was the only path for me. You wouldn’t understand, because you’ve probably never lost someone.” I didn’t know when it started. But at some point, my vision had been tainted a dark red. I saw everything in black and white, but when I swung a sword, everything before me became red, even if there wasn’t a drop of blood around. I started to think that the only color I saw was beautiful. Maybe my heart was broken, but vengeance was the only thing keeping it beating right

now.

“I don’t know. But no, I haven’t lost someone like you have.”

“Then don’t insult my plans for vengeance!”

“I wasn’t trying to. But you want to be strong so badly you cried tears over it, and even now, you’re having such fierce emotions that you’re yelling. That’s how important it is to you, right? Since I haven’t experienced what you have, I can’t insult it. If I did, I would be making light of your experience. There’s no point in doing that when you feel so strongly about something. But most of all, that would be rude.” He turned his gaze back on me. His eyes were clear, and I almost felt like I could see the peace in his heart through them. “However... there’s nothing beyond revenge in the future you’re painting. Even though I have no talent with a sword, I can tell that you’re wasting your talents. What will you do after you get your revenge? I just think it’s a waste to be unable to see the future after that.”

“How I use my skills is my own prerogative, isn’t it?!”

Louis let out another sigh. He then stood up and left.

“Ah...” As soon as the words left my mouth I felt the blood drain from my face, but it was too late—all I could do was watch him leave without a word.

“Brother.” As soon as I got home from the tower, I went to my brother’s room. I just felt like talking to him. He was sitting at his game board alone, and I figured he was probably replaying one of the matches he had with Uncle Romello.

“I was just taking a break. No need to be shy, come on in.”

“Thanks...”

“It’s unusual for you to come here.”

“Is it?” I gave him a puzzled look, but then I thought about it. It was true that I’d only come here maybe once or twice since we came to the capital.

“So? What is it?”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Of course. That’s why you came here, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Why did you decide to learn swordsmanship?”

He laughed. “That’s a funny question. How could a son of the Anderson family, the strongest house in Tasmeria, not pick up a sword?”

“I suppose that’s true.”

He set down his piece on the board with a soft clunk and then focused his attention on me. “Merry, if there’s something you want to ask me, just go ahead. It’s just me and you here. There’s no need to hold back with your family, right?”

For a second, I froze. I wondered how long it had been since the two of us had talked like this. Actually...not just with him. How long had it been since I talked to Father, or to Nana? I’d only exchanged the barest minimum of words with my family. That’s why I’d hesitated for a moment. My brother just stared at me without urging me to continue.

“Have you ever wished to get vengeance for Mother?”

He frowned thoughtfully for a moment. “Honestly, yes. I thought I’d like to kill every last one of the people who killed her and send them to hell myself.”

“What about now?”

He smiled sadly at me. “I still feel the same way. If I ever got the chance, I’d take it without hesitation. I can never forgive the people who stole our happiness...our precious family away from us.”

“Good...” I felt relieved hearing his answer.

“But, Merry, at the same time, I’m worried about how you’re going about things.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said that your vengeance was everything to you. But that means you’re turning your eyes away from the present and only looking at the past. You aren’t wishing for happiness. How can I reassure you when I see you constantly

chasing a happiness from the past that we can never get back?" He spoke slowly, as if he were admonishing me. His words fell heavily onto my heart.

I'd made a decision to throw away my attachments to the kindness of the world and go down the rocky path instead. That's why I couldn't turn around and look at the past...but perhaps I was actually clinging to the kindness in that path, the warm days of the past that I could never recoup. I couldn't let it rest.

It was because the reason why Mother said goodbye to Father and tried to come home from the capital before him was because of my own selfishness. If I hadn't said I wanted to celebrate my birthday on the day of instead of later, Father would've come home with her and my mother would've reached the manor safely. I couldn't forgive myself. The reason why our most precious person was stolen from us was because of *me*. I couldn't pretend like these intense emotions of wanting vengeance—whether I had to be dragged down to hell with them or not—didn't exist.

"Maybe you'll be satisfied with that. But Father wants you and me to be happy, because he loves us and we're his family. That's why the way you're going about this hurts so much. It worries me." My brother's eyes were kind as he looked at me, and that kindness hurt.

"Brother..."

"When I heard that you got attacked by bandits, all the blood drained from my face. And I cursed my own foolishness, from the bottom of my heart. The incident with Mother was important to me too. I'm not lying when I say that I wish for them all to go to hell." My brother reached out a hand toward me. "But you're alive. You're *alive*!" His big hand clasped mine tightly. Almost as if he were trying to make sure I was really here. "I don't want to look away from such a precious thing that's right in my hand and regret it later." His tone of voice grew stronger, and his words stabbed into me. Lately I felt like he was much more expressive with his emotions, just like Father. At first I thought that it was because of Uncle Romello, but I guess not.

"Are you saying what I'm doing is wrong?"

"No. Everyone's entitled to their own emotions. There're no right or wrong feelings. As long as you follow your heart, then that's what's right for you. What

I'm saying is simply a result of my own selfishness." He let go of my hand and caressed my head. "I won't oppose your desire for revenge. I can't. You do what you want. But don't forget that Father and I want you to be happy."

It was a very kind wish. However, it wasn't enough to melt my heart that had frozen over like ice. Why did they want me to be happy when we would never have that same happiness again? Why would they wish for my happiness when those warm times would never return to me? No matter how much they wished for it, we couldn't get back the happiness that had been stolen from us. And it was all my fault. I didn't understand. Countless questions and doubts ran through my mind.

That night, I didn't fall asleep right away as I usually did. I left the window open and let the night breeze blow in as I remained awake, thinking. The morning eventually came, and I hadn't slept. I wasn't able to sort through it all. I went to the sparring grounds and swung my sword like always. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't find an answer.

Louis said this was a waste of my talent.

My brother said he wished for my happiness.

I had honed my skills so I could rip apart my enemies and get vengeance. And getting that revenge would make me happy.

That's all I could think about. My family had lost my mother, and a part of everyone's hearts had broken, or so I thought. In reality, it was *my* heart that had been frozen. Perhaps that's not even a strong enough way to describe it. If you could have looked, I was sure my heart was tattered and broken. I still saw the world in crimson. I suddenly realized I was swinging my sword while distracted, so I quickly shifted my thoughts. I would think about those complicated things later because right now all I needed to do was focus on honing my swordsmanship.

Ahh, I was getting excited now. I was having fun. I was having so much fun I could hardly stand it. I even felt happiness seeing the red hues around me.

Once I was finished training, I looked around. There were fewer people here today, and Kreuz wasn't here either. I wondered if something had happened, but since he wasn't there, I couldn't ask anyone. No one would inform a

“commoner” like me even if I tried to find out. I felt something akin to resignation as I cleaned up and went back to the mansion.

As soon as I walked through the door, my brother came running to greet me, which was very unusual.

“Merry!”

“What is it?”

“We just got the news...” I braced myself for the worst when I saw his reaction. “Father has killed the bandits who attacked Mother.”

Everything went dark. It was like the entire world had frozen for a split-second. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it. The soldiers confirmed it!”

“Oh...” I responded and started to walk away, suddenly feeling shaky.

“H-hey! Merry!” He called my name to stop me.

“I’m going back to my room.” I rejected his attempts to continue the conversation and left. To be honest, I’m not even sure how I managed to get there, but before I realized it, I was in my room. I absently stared at the view out my window. At some point, the sun had set, and the sky had taken on the dark colors of night. It was quiet. The sight and lack of sound made it feel like I was the last person in the whole world.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. Were they happy tears, or...?

At the very least, my goal had been achieved. Father had killed the men who attacked Mother. I was certain he had been merciless and he had knocked them into hell. My wish for vengeance had been granted, and I was genuinely happy about that. I was happy, but...for some reason, I couldn’t be completely joyful about it. Instead, it felt like a new hole had opened up in my heart.

I wanted to be the one to do it. I knew it was selfish, but I’d wanted to use the skills I’d honed and everything I’d learned to put an end to them. That was why I had taken up the sword in the first place and worked hard to get stronger.

That was my whole reason for living. It made me feel so frustrated. It was pathetic.

But my goal had been achieved.

So...what was I supposed to do now? I had to take this feeling of grief and find a new goal and meaning for myself. How would I live my life? My heart felt as if it were the same color as the sky. I cried the whole night, just like the day when I had lost my mother.

I heard the sound of swords clanging against each other. They came from the sparring grounds, just as they did every day. Ever since my brother told me that Father had killed the bandits, I hadn't been training and had holed up in my room. I hadn't seen my father or my brother. I wasn't sure how many days it had been. My heart still felt like it had a hole in it, and I was wallowing in my grief. The darkness of that night was still in my heart.

It was so bad that I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to stay here until I withered away.

I rolled over in bed. Were the days always this long? Morning came, then night, and then another morning. The world kept on turning, no matter what happened. Nothing would change whether I stayed in my room or not. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the outside world. I must've fallen asleep, because the next time I opened my eyes, it was late afternoon. I pushed my languid body up into a sitting position and climbed out of bed. I walked over to the window. It seemed like training was done for the day. What would I do here alone? What would I *want* to do? I placed my hand on the windowsill and pondered.

I wanted to see the view again, I thought, so I impulsively went outside. I left the mansion and ran all the way to the tower, racing up the stairs to the very top.

"Louis..." I called his name softly, but I didn't see him anywhere. My shoulders slumped. I wasn't even sure what I would've said or done had he been here. I slid to the floor in my usual spot and slowly looked down at the view below. It was different from how it looked when I usually came up here—I noticed lights from houses hazily standing out in the darkness. All of them together created a very magical view.

It was beautiful. Although it was different from the view I was used to seeing, it captured my attention even more. Suddenly, I heard a rustling noise and I felt around on the ground to see what it was. I discovered a piece of paper that had been wedged between the stones and I pulled it out. I wondered if it belonged to one of the soldiers but then remembered that no one else ever climbed up the long staircase. So it must be...

My heart raced as I quickly unfolded it. There were three simple sentences inside. *"If you no longer have a goal, all you have to do is find a new one. You have time. There's no need to rush your life."*

If I hadn't found this tonight of all nights, the note probably wouldn't have meant anything to me. But now I understood it, and painfully so. Tears dripped down my face onto the paper. Vengeance had been everything to me. I had focused on it and abandoned everything else. But just like that, I'd lost it. My wish had been granted, yes—but not in the form that I'd been hoping for. It was the only thing I could see as I kept moving forward, but suddenly my goal had been snatched right out of my hands.

When I'd realized that, I almost felt like my knees would give out. I had no idea what to do now. I had no idea what I *wanted* to do. Vengeance was all I could see, and I didn't know anything else. It felt like I lost my guidepost and was thrust into the darkness. I felt panicked, empty, and afraid of the future. I deeply and painfully understood what Louis was talking about now when he spoke of what would come after my goal was realized.

"I'll just have to find a new one..." I murmured, and then smiled. *"But you're alive. You're alive!"* I remembered what my brother said. He was right. I was alive. I still had a future, unlike Mother. I wondered how many regrets she had as her life was ending. I had no way of knowing. But I had blamed myself for being the cause of her death and hated myself, hated the people who had actually caused it, and I hated the world for allowing it to happen.

My family and I experienced such sadness when we lost our mother. But the one who was the saddest and hurt the most was certainly my mother, not me. She had everything taken from her—her goals, her dreams, her family—and I only just realized that now. Maybe that was why I had been stuck...and that was exactly why I couldn't waste the things that I had. I couldn't throw away my

future. Throwing away something that I had that someone else *should* have would be completely selfish. But at the same time, I felt angry at myself about it. Instead of fearing the future, I should be grateful. If I had lost my goal, I just needed to find a new one. I had to use the things I'd learned and put them toward my new goal.

It suddenly seemed like the burdens weighing down my heart were lifted just a little. I hadn't decided anything yet, but I could take my time. All I had to do was keep moving forward. "Mother...I feel like I can finally say goodbye to you now," I whispered as I looked up at the sky.

"Oh, Louis. Perfect timing. I want you to take care of these documents and add to this one. They're both due back to me in three days." Louis felt a split-second twinge of malice as his father Romello gestured toward the mountain of papers, but he pushed the feeling aside and nodded. His father was making him do this to teach him the job and give him experience handling things. Still, it made Louis feel a bit dreary since he knew his father could finish all this work in only *one* day while he was getting three.

"Yes, yes, I'll do it. But in exchange, could you please not go out tonight and just stay in instead? I have a bunch of things I'd like you to check over on those documents you gave me the other day."

"Oh...all right, all right." Romello relented and nodded in agreement.

"I'll take these documents and get them back to you later." Louis had a feeling this batch was the same size as the last, or maybe even slightly bigger. Nevertheless, he picked up the stack and left the room. He let out a sigh as he felt the weight of the work in his arms. He stepped out into the hallway and started walking toward his room. On the way there, he glanced out the window at the tower. As he gazed at it, he thought about the girl he'd met there, Merry. Since he had helped Romello write the notification regarding the deaths of the bandits, he knew what had happened, and he was hoping that those were the bandits who she had been after. But at the same time, if that were the case, he wondered how she felt about it. She said the path of vengeance was the only one she chose, regardless of what she had to gain or lose.

The first thing that sprang to mind when she had said that was wondering what would happen once she reached her goal. She had poured everything she had into it and abandoned all else. But what would happen once that goal went away? The more she put into it, the more grief she would feel once it was gone. Once he realized that, he began to worry about her. She was single-mindedly running toward that goal. Even when someone had beat her and she cried tears of frustration, she smiled and said she would still keep going down that path. This would be true as long as her goal of vengeance remained, but once it was gone, what would she cry about? What would she smile about?

Would that feeling of loss torment her? Would it break her?

He worried about that. He looked back down at the documents. Louis was concerned about her, but he wouldn't be able to visit the tower for a while because he had his own goal that he was running toward.

After hearing the news, I managed to find a bit of time to go to the tower, but I didn't end up seeing her. That's why I left her a letter. It was actually the first time I'd written a letter outside of an official capacity, so it took me forever to decide what to write. It was a good experience, though.

It was only three sentences, but I couldn't believe how long it had taken me to write even that much. I wouldn't blame her if she was mad at me the next time I saw her. I just hoped the feeling of loss hadn't crushed her and that she hadn't closed off her heart and shut herself off from her emotions. I'd rather her be irrationally angry and cry about how she had lost her goal in life.

I wondered when I started to grow so fond of her animated face. When did I start thinking I could watch her forever and not get sick of it? She wasn't like the daughters of noble families I was accustomed to, who hid their emotions and did nothing but smile sweetly. She cried and laughed and got angry—she felt her emotions freely, and I found that very attractive.

"Excuse me, Master Louis. Lord Romello would like to see you." A servant called out to him.

"My father? All right. I'm sorry, but could you take these documents to my room?"

"Of course."

The boy was now even more determined to finish the work he had before him. And with that, he headed toward Romello's room.

Chapter 3:

The Future Duchess Dreams

I FROWNED AS I FOUGHT AND SWUNG my sword, feeling a bit of discomfort. Just as I suspected, my blade was knocked out of my hand, and I lost.

“I heard you took a break without telling anyone. Is something wrong?” My sparring partner Kreuz asked me with a puzzled look on his face. “I felt some hesitation in your swordsmanship.”

“Yes... I think maybe I haven’t worked through my feelings.”

He didn’t seem convinced but didn’t press me any further on the subject. I’d returned to my training after all. What other choice did I have? I’d cried so much. Cried and thought. I still hadn’t found a new goal or any meaning in this. I hadn’t been able to see anything else all this time. All I’d focused on was my revenge, and that was the only thing I’d run toward.

I had nothing left. I wasn’t even sure what choices I had, so how could I make a choice? But I couldn’t just stand still, either. I couldn’t just absently wait for time to pass, for the sake of my mother, who had all her time robbed from her.

That was why I had come back to my training; I wasn’t sure what else to do. This was all I had, but I didn’t want to stand still. I figured that the best thing to do was just go back to my training as usual, instead of wasting all my time thinking and hesitating. It seemed I was more suited to physical activity than mental activity anyway. I hadn’t sorted through my emotions, but ever since I returned to my training, I gradually felt calmer.

Kreuz didn’t say anything else about the subject and instead reached out and tousled my hair. “I’m going out to eat with the guys here later. Wanna come with us?”

My thoughts froze for a split-second at the sudden invitation. I pondered it for a moment and then nodded. “Sure.”

“Yeah? All right, I’ll tell the general.”

“Thank you.”

I said yes because I should go out and see and do more things. I hadn't found a new goal yet, so that's why it felt like the thing to do. All I had focused on until now had been my training. I wanted to change myself, and this was a good opportunity.

After I was done with training for the day, I went out into town. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I had gone to any shops or restaurants here. I never had the need to buy anything, and since I spent my entire day training, I didn't have the time.

I suppose I was very sheltered in that way, like a typical noblewoman.

I looked all around me as I followed behind Kreuz.

“Kreuz!” One of the soldiers sitting in the corner called for him.

“Hey, there! Sorry we took so long.” Kreuz grinned at him.

“You can say that again! What in the world—Waah! Kreuz! Did you kidnap Mer?!”

“Don't be ridiculous. Why would I ever kidnap her? She'd kill me on the spot!”

“True,” several soldiers agreed at once, nodding.

I recognized these soldiers as they had all trained at House Anderson before.

“I just wasn't expecting to see her. Welcome, Mer.”

“Thank you.”

Suddenly everyone started greeting me.

“Glad you're here.”

“We're happy to see you!”

“Good job, Kreuz! It was starting to get stuffy with just us guys, so it's like you planted a flower in here!”

I was both surprised and hesitant as everyone greeted me so warmly. I glanced over at Kreuz.

“What's wrong?”

“I’m just wondering why they’re being so welcoming.”

“Why wouldn’t they be? We all work hard and sweat in the same place. You’re our comrade!”

“That’s right! I respect you, Mer. You’re so tiny, but you’re so strong! When I was your age, the only thing I was doing was playing around!”

“Though at first, I *did* think you were nothing but the general’s favorite!”

“Hah, yeah! I’m not jealous anymore though, especially since I realized how talented you are and how hard you work!”

“Yeah, I get that! There’s no way I could work as hard as her!”

I stared blankly at all the guys.

“They’ve got a high opinion of you, little lady. They just never got the chance to tell you. Up until now, you were putting up a wall that made you seem really unapproachable.”

“Was I?”

“Yep. It was like all you saw was your sword and nothing else.”

He had hit the nail on the head, and I was speechless. Thinking back on it, I suppose that really was how I had acted.

Kreuz reached out and patted my head. I looked down, feeling a mixture of guilt and embarrassment come over me because of what everyone had said.

“Kreuz, what are you and Mer whispering about over there? Get over here and let us in!”

“All right. C’mon. Let’s go.”

“Okay...!”

I took a seat and ordered whatever I wanted to eat and drink. I had actually never eaten outside the house before, so I was a little excited. As I ate and drank with the others, I decided to ask everyone something. “Why did you all choose to become soldiers?” The mood among everyone was quite warm and cheerful, so I thought it would be the right time to ask.

“Why did I become a soldier, hmm? Probably for the money. I’ve got a lot of

brothers.”

I gave him a puzzled look. I didn’t understand why having a lot of siblings meant he was in it for the money.

“Ah, you know, to help pay for food at home. I wasn’t great at my studies in school, so I thought the best way for me to make money was to make use of my physical abilities. I’m pretty confident in my strength.”

The phrase “to help pay for food” was shocking to me. After all, I had never thought about that being a problem. I’d always taken for granted being able to eat as many warm meals as I desired. Wasn’t that normal for everyone?

“It didn’t take long for the general to crush that confidence though!” Another soldier quipped as my mind busily worked through my questions.

No one else looked surprised at his statement. It seemed like they shared his sentiments, in fact.

“Shaddup! What about you?”

“Me? I thought the soldiers were cool! I saw the general on his victory tour once he got home from the war, and I vowed to become a soldier just like him!”

“Ohh, I get that. I always feel at ease knowing our kingdom will be safe as long as he’s around. I joined up for the same reason.”

“Yeah, the general’s a big part of it. He actually saved my village during the war, so I vowed to follow him. I wanted to protect people, just like he did.”

“Me? I didn’t have any personal reason like you guys for joining up. It just kind of happened! But I understand why you guys felt that way. After I joined, I was lucky enough to be put in the general’s regiment. It was tough trying to keep up with him, but at the same time I gained so much respect for him. I’d follow him anywhere!”

After that, the topic changed to my father’s training regimen and various legends about his heroic deeds. The soldiers normally had stern looks on their faces, but now their eyes gleamed as they spoke about Father. They talked about how honored they were to follow in his footsteps. That they wanted to protect people just like he did. And they all spoke very passionately about it.

“Why do you want to protect other people?” I asked Kreuz, who was sitting next to me.

“Why do I wanna protect people? Hm... I think the only ones burning with that desire are guys like these who were victims of the war in one way or another. Everyone here has their own reasons for joining up, whether it’s money or glory. It’s not like they had some lofty ideas of protecting people from the very start. But at some point, we started feeling the pride of working under the general, and that became everything to us. We adore him. We all want to be just like him, and that motivates us. That naturally led to us wanting to protect people and taking pride in that. And if that means we get to protect the kingdom and the people who are precious to us, even in a roundabout way, we’re happy with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll understand someday.”

Another guy started chatting with Kreuz so our conversation stopped there, but the strange feeling inside of me kept bothering me, even after I got home. I really didn’t understand the desire to protect someone else. I didn’t understand the things Louis had told me either. Why would my father keep working to protect the citizens after my mother was taken away from us? Why would the soldiers continue down that path when they just kept getting injured every day?

“Welcome home, Mer.”

“Hey, Nana? Is Father home yet?” I whispered into her ear.

“Yes, he is.”

“Can I go see him?”

“He doesn’t have anything else on his schedule today, so I don’t see why not.”

“Okay. I’ll go to him, then.” I made my way to Father’s study. I felt like it had been a long time since I’d spoken with him. I’d holed up in my room after he killed the bandits, and he had also been very busy since then.

I felt a little nervous as I entered his study. He was relaxing with a glass of alcohol.

“Merry, is that you? You don’t come in here very often. I heard Kreuz took you out to eat with the guys today, eh?”

“Yes, it was very fun.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. So? What’s on your mind?”

“There’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Why do you protect the citizens?” He looked a bit surprised at the abrupt nature of my question. “When I was talking with Kreuz and the soldiers today, I asked them why they had joined the army. They all had different answers, but even so, they said they admired you and wanted to protect the kingdom and the citizens just like you do. But I just don’t understand it. Why do you want to protect the citizens?”

“Is me protecting the citizens really that strange a concept?”

“Yes. Because while you were out protecting the citizens, Mother was killed by them.” I heard my father’s breath catch in his throat. “Is it really that important to protect people you don’t know, not even their names? Especially since you don’t know if they’ll ever repay you for it.”

“Do you think of the citizens as your enemies, perhaps?”

“No... But I don’t think very highly of them either. They should just get stronger instead of having other people protect them. If they just get stronger, then they can protect themselves! Why should you have to protect everyone? I think that the people of this kingdom are even worse than the soldiers of Tw—”

A sharp, dry sound rang out, and I swallowed the rest of my sentence. I felt a burning sensation on my cheek and realized that my father had just slapped me.

“Don’t you dare say another word. I won’t allow it,” he uttered in a low voice. “I didn’t start out with some noble idea of protecting the citizens. I just wanted to test my own strength.” He let out a heavy sigh. “I lost myself in it. I stood there on the battlefield at my wit’s end, watching the enemy trample the citizens. I realized that I was the only one with the power to protect them, so my body just moved automatically.”

He tipped back his glass and drained the contents before letting out another sigh.

“When Merelda was killed, it made me rethink a lot of things. The thought that a citizen of this kingdom killed my wife made me feel as though all my efforts on the battlefield were in vain. But it was also the citizens of this kingdom who reminded me that everything I’d done wasn’t a waste after all,” he said with a sad smile on his face.

“After they touted me as a hero, I felt an intense pressure to live up to that title. I ran after it as fast as I could, but that made a trail behind me. And to my surprise, other people started following me—the citizens. I’m sure you heard some of them tell you why they joined up because their villages had been burned to the ground in the war. I watched over those men who became soldiers because they wanted to protect someone with their own two hands. They were following in my footsteps, protecting complete strangers—strangers to them, but who all were important to someone else—and then people began to follow in *their* footsteps. It was at that point that I started to feel pride that people were following in my footsteps, and that’s what saved me. It showed me that all my efforts hadn’t been in vain. I hoped that in a roundabout way, fewer people would have to mourn their loved ones and experience the same sadness that I had.”

“But...”

“Do you think all the citizens are bandits? Or will become bandits? Don’t you understand that they have family who love them too? Is it a crime to be unable to protect yourself and to want to be protected by others?”

I was shocked silent.

“Not everyone can wield a sword like you can. And even if they did, there are plenty of people who have to work too hard to make money to feed their families instead of keeping their skills honed. You’re saying they should protect themselves and drop everything to do the same amount of training you do? That’s pure arrogance.”

“But I...” I started to realize I was running out of ways to object.

“Let me give you an example. What if Nana was begging for your help? You

wouldn't save her?"

"I love Nana. Of course I'd save her."

"What if one of Nana's loved ones was begging for help?"

"I'd protect them, if it would make Nana sad if something happened to them."

"You wouldn't tell them to protect themselves? Even though they might be a complete stranger to you? You'd protect them?"

I was speechless, because I understood now what he was trying to say.

"Exactly. You'd be protecting someone who was precious to someone else. Not all citizens are bad people. The ones who killed your mother were bandits. They were the ones who committed a crime, and I'm to blame for not being able to protect her from it. However, it's wrong to blame everyone for a crime that a small number of people committed."

He reached out and cradled my face in his hands. My cheek didn't hurt or feel hot anymore. Now it was my eyes that were warm, as tears streamed down my face.

"Everyone has people who are important to them, whether they're strangers to you or not. I don't want to see them mourning their loved ones like I had to. That's what keeps me going." He wiped away my tears and smiled.

His words kept repeating in my head over and over again. *"I don't want to see them mourning their loved ones like I had to."*

I understood that feeling. I remembered the hopelessness, sadness, and hatred I felt then, and I never wanted to experience that again. And at the same time, I didn't want my loved ones to experience those feelings either. I knew how painful it was. The moment I realized that, I thought about what Louis had said to me before, up at the tower.

"I just realized a lot of people sacrificed their lives so we could have peace. Somewhere out there, I'm sure there are still people paying for it. Do they think they're doing it to protect the kingdom? I'm not sure anyone sees that bigger picture. They only fought to protect the things precious to them."

If that was true, then that must mean there were other people out there

consumed by grief and feeling hopeless at the senseless nature of the world. As soon as that dawned on me, I felt ashamed. I thought I had to be the most miserable person in the world. I certainly had good reason to curse the world and be unhappy after Mother was taken from me. I never even considered that anyone else could go through the same thing.

Even though they were right by my side, my brother and father had lost their loved one as well, but I never even thought about their feelings. I just cursed the world, cursed my own powerlessness, and blamed myself for my mother's death.

I couldn't see anything but revenge and fixated on it as my end point.

"I don't want to look away from such a precious thing that's right in my hand and regret it later." Even though my brother had been through the same pain as I had, he had wished for my happiness.

The next day, I went straight to the tower after I was done with my training. The view at sunset was lonely but still had a warmth to it. And, of course, I was thinking about what Louis said before.

"They have people who are important to them, who also have people who are important to them. Just like the people in Tweil do. When you have a big group of people gathered together, you can create a kingdom. It's difficult to listen to the stories of every single person in the kingdom, but I want to protect it so that they can all live their lives free of worries. I want to use my intelligence to protect their peaceful way of life. I want to carry on the wishes of those who sacrificed their lives and honor them. That's what I thought, anyway."

So many people were going about their lives down there, below the tower. I didn't know their names. They didn't factor into my life at all. Even after I came up here, I didn't feel a desire to protect them. But...I also didn't want them to feel that hopelessness I felt. I didn't want them to feel that pain because I knew how horrible it was. Every person below me had people they loved, and those people had people that they loved. They had parents, siblings, friends, significant others...all kinds of relationships. People that they loved so much that they would feel a hole in their hearts if they lost them.

And those people might be related to someone I know, somehow. No—they

definitely were. The connections between people in this town—and the whole big world—were interwoven like a spider’s web.

In other words, even if I didn’t know those people, they might be loved by someone I knew. I thought about my father and brother, the servants who worked in our house, the guards of House Anderson, the soldiers...and Louis.

Could I allow any of them to be in pain? Could I bear seeing their smiles vanish from their faces?

The answer was no. I wanted them to be happy. I wanted them to live, and smile if they could. And if I could make that happen with my sword, then I think that would be very meaningful. I didn’t really understand this noble concept of protection, but I would do it for my own sake if that meant that no one else—especially those around me—had to suffer like I did. I decided to use my ability I’d honed using my sword for that sake.

A little girl frantically ran through the middle of town, as if she were trying to escape something. Judging by the look on her face, that *something* was nearby. She was panting and stumbling and had just about reached the main road when she tripped over a rock on the edge of the road. She could hear the footsteps creeping up behind her as she lay on the ground, and a hopeless look overtook her face.

“C’mon, little girl. Cooperate with us already!”

“Yeah, just be a good girl till your dad comes to get you!”

“Exactly. Whether you’re alive by the time he gets here or not is up to you.”

The men sneered at her as they approached, and she scrambled backward, trying to escape. One of the men didn’t appreciate that and clicked his tongue with irritation.

“Let me ask you something. Are you guys *really* going to give her back to her dad?” All of a sudden, another voice rang out. It was a young voice, but the girl was still relieved when it wasn’t another man. She lifted her face from the ground.

“Hm? Are you okay?”

The figure standing there that spoke was small, and they looked to be about the same age as she was. The girl assumed it was a boy because of their haircut and clothes. He didn't seem afraid at all and looked at the little girl with a smile.

“Do you know those men?”

The girl shook her head.

“Hm, I see...” The boy nodded, looking satisfied. The girl wondered why they were acting so calm and frowned.

“Who are you?” One of the men demanded.

“We've got no business with you. I suggest you get the hell out of here, unless you wanna get hurt,” another piped up.

“Yeah, I'll leave. But I'm taking the girl with me or I'm not budging. So, what're you guys gonna do?” The boy wasn't intimidated by the men glaring at them at all.

“Looks like we're gonna have to teach you a lesson!” The men took out their weapons and attacked. The little girl squeezed her eyes shut in fear.

Even a boy my age won't stand a chance... she thought, imagining the worst. The men were much bigger than him, so she was sure he'd get hurt.

But when she finally, hesitantly opened her eyes, she was shocked at what she saw. The big men were on the ground, covered in wounds! All she could do was stare in astonishment. She pinched her cheek to make sure she wasn't dreaming. She pinched so hard that she accidentally hurt herself.

“You okay?” The boy came over to her. Even though he was the one who had caused this scene, she wasn't afraid of him. Instead, she was overcome with happiness and relief.

“Y-yes. I'm fine...”

“Good. This must've been horrible for you. You're all bruised up...” The boy caressed the girl's cheek.

She couldn't believe she'd pinched herself hard enough to make a red,

swollen bruise on her face. She was embarrassed, but at the same time completely entranced by the boy's gentle touch. "Thank you so much for saving me."

"You don't need to thank me. A cute little girl like you shouldn't be walking alone around here. Come on, I'll take you back out to the main road." He offered her a hand, helped her to her feet, and they started walking. She was a little worried about what would happen to those men, or that they might attack them again from behind, so she glanced back at them. "Don't worry. I tied them all up, so they can't get up on their own." The boy chuckled wryly, as if reading her thoughts.

"O-oh..."



“Yep. I’m gonna hand them over to the army later.”

“All right. You really did save me. Thank you so much.”

This time, the boy gave her a genuine smile. Once again, the girl was so completely entranced that she couldn’t say a word the entire time back.

They safely returned to the main road and walked for a few moments. Just then, a group of people who stood out from the crowd began walking toward them. They were soldiers of the kingdom’s army—ones under the general’s direct command. They were the most skilled soldiers and had undergone strict training so they would not shame the general’s name. This was clear even by the way they carried themselves.

“Uh-oh...” The boy muttered as soon as he saw them. He was clearly flustered.

The girl wondered why, because he hadn’t been afraid of those big men back there...but she soon found out the answer.

One of the men walking with the soldiers saw the boy and was clearly surprised...and charged toward him. “You idiot!” he yelled.

The girl was totally confused as she watched the man shake his fist at the boy.

“I was wondering where you went, and here you are! Wait, I know what’s going on here. I can’t believe you... How many times do I have to tell you not to poke your nose into things!”

“Well, I didn’t mean to. I was just walking through town when I heard about it, and then I just happened to see her.”

“Whatever. Just hurry up and go home,” the man said with a deep sigh.

“All right! Sorry. I gotta go.” The boy waved at her and then left.

“Ah!” The girl tried to stop him, but she realized she didn’t know his name, so she couldn’t call out to him.

“I’m so sorry we’re late. My name is Gazell. I’ve come to take you home.”

Normally, she’d be so excited to see a war hero that she’d ask for a handshake. But right now, she was more concerned with her own personal

savior—the boy who had saved her—than the kingdom’s hero. She asked the general several times on the way home if he knew the boy’s name, but he only responded vaguely and wouldn’t tell her.

She vowed to see that boy again. She swore to herself she would, and then she would thank him.

“Welcome home, Master Pax.” I ran into my brother as soon as I got home. I greeted him as my body double would since there were other people around.

“You’re the one who just got home, so shouldn’t I be telling you ‘Welcome home’? You went out into town again, didn’t you?”

“Ugh...”

I was still wearing the clothes I wore when I went out, so it was pointless to try to deny it. There was nothing I could say. I had purposefully chosen a different path from usual to come back so no one would see me, but I suppose I was unlucky.

“How many times do we have to tell you not to go out to town without one of the soldiers? Father is hailed as a hero and has many enemies, you know that. You’re strong, but who knows what would happen if you were targeted by a professional assassin or something. What do you think it would look like if a bodyguard fell for that reason? Well...what’s done is done, but at least make sure Father doesn’t find out.”

“Oh, um... He already did...” My eyes darted around.

“What?” My brother’s gaze sharpened.

“I was out in town, and I heard a big commotion. Apparently, a noblewoman’s daughter went missing, so I looked for her and found her. I was about to take her home when I happened to run into Master Gazell...”

Lately, I’d been going to town when I had free time. I used to go out alone before, but I only went to the tower. Nowadays I would wander every nook and cranny of the town. When Kreuz took me out that day, there were so many things I’d never seen or heard before, and it made me very curious. That was

one reason, at least.

However, my main reason was because I didn't want to dull my senses. Looking at everything from way up high in the tower wasn't enough. I wanted to get closer and observe the people's daily lives. I'd distanced myself from the commoners for so long, but I thought maybe if I got closer to them, it would strengthen my resolve. I had a feeling I was right.

I didn't want them to suffer like me. And the closer I was to them, the deeper that desire was etched upon my heart. Still, what happened today was a complete coincidence. I was simply exploring the town when I heard a commotion. I was curious, so I went to see what was going on. I overheard that a girl had disappeared, and when people realized it was a nobleman's daughter, the commotion grew even more.

I looked around for a little bit, thinking about this girl who I'd never met before. I was certain she probably didn't know much about the outside world, just like me. I thought about what kind of places she might be curious about, so I searched those places and found her. She wore simple but pretty clothes. By the time I got to her, she was already being chased by those men.

I remembered that she had been quiet the whole way back to the main road. She must've been afraid of me after the way I subdued the men.

My brother heaved a deep sigh. I felt bad, but at the same time, I was satisfied that I had saved that girl.

"You really like to be out in the action even though Father's the general, don't you? And on top of that, you got involved when the daughter of a noble was kidnapped! I'm sure you thought that must mean you should get involved. Whatever. Just go on and get scolded already."

"He already scolded me..."

"You're naive. I'm sure there's a very intense training session waiting for you to make sure you don't go out in town again."

"I wouldn't mind that, actually..."

"Hah! You're just about the only person who'd think of that as a reward!" My brother laughed and patted me on the head before walking off again.

I returned to my room and changed.

Nana came into my room right as I was finished. “Mer, the master wants to see you,” she told me and then sighed. “Mer, please don’t do such dangerous things. I’m not sure my heart can take it.” She had an usually stern look on her face. I’d done nothing but worry Nana lately.

“I’m sorry. But don’t you think I’m just being myself?”

Nana gave up and sighed again. “Don’t keep the master waiting. Go on, now. Hurry up.”

“Yes, Nana.” I meekly obeyed her and started walking to meet my father. She stayed still, so apparently she wasn’t coming with me.

“You’re such a handful because you think that way, you know that? I should be admonishing you, but when I see you walking around like that, even I can’t help but think you’re just being yourself.”

I heard her mutter in a very quiet voice behind me. I definitely heard her, though, and I had to laugh.

I went to my father’s study and saw him sitting in a chair in the center of the room. He had a very stern look on his face, just like Nana. But, of course, he was much more intimidating than her.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry for doing that without permission.” I apologized to him right away. No matter what happened, the fact remained that I had worried him.

He heaved a heavy sigh in response. “What am I going to do with you, hm? Well, no matter. You protected Count McClain’s daughter. Thank you.” I bowed my head in response to his words. “However, the fact remains that you went against my rules and went out to town alone. As punishment, I’m going to be subjecting you to very harsh, rigorous training for a week. And don’t you dare think you’ll be going out to town again for a long while.”

“Yes, Father.”

My brother was right; my punishment was indeed more special training. Lately I’d been going to town because I wasn’t training as much. I thought about

how this was a good opportunity for me to start fresh, and I bowed my head to Father once more.

“Hah, hah...”

Romello looked out over the sparring grounds at House Anderson and Merellis was standing in the center. She was panting, trying to catch her breath. Sweat dropped down off of her, and even from this distance he could see that her clothes were drenched.

“I try to make it a habit not to comment on other people’s parenting, but isn’t this training regimen a bit too tough on a little girl, Gazell?” he said to his friend standing behind him as he watched Merellis.

“Too tough? That’s the perfect punishment for her selfish actions.” Gazell snorted but didn’t look down at Merellis.

Romello figured the general must be confident that his daughter was carrying out the training she’d been told to do, even unsupervised. She was, in fact, standing apart from the other soldiers and carrying out the rigorous training regimen her father had prescribed to her. “Her selfish actions? All she did was walk through town.”

“How do you know th—never mind. It never ceases to amaze me, but there really isn’t anything you don’t know, huh?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course there is.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“You’re really not letting this one go.” Romello said in an easygoing manner.

Gazell glared at him, prompting a laugh from his friend. That only made Gazell’s glare even sharper. Romello thought that if he laughed one more time, surely Gazell would blow his stack, so he withdrew with a sigh. “There are too many things I don’t know. Especially about people,” he said, the lighthearted tone from before now gone from his voice. Instead, it carried the weight of responsibility that came with being the prime minister and supporting an entire kingdom.

“What do you mean?” Gazell asked in a serious voice.

“Exactly what I said. Like, why do people wish for things that are out of their reach? Hope is like a flame. If you wish too hard, it can grow out of control into an ambition, and if the fires of your ambition become too great, it can burn both you and the kingdom.” Gazell looked puzzled in response. “Don’t worry about it, it’s personal. So? Why don’t you want her going into town?”

“Don’t change the subject like that! Well, no matter, but let me ask you a question. What noble wouldn’t be angry if their daughter went out to town alone?”

“Even though she has the strength to protect herself from danger?”

“That means nothing to a parent worried about their child. We still haven’t found out who was behind the bandit attack. So, why should I allow her to go out to town? Wait, don’t tell me you...!” A thought popped into Gazell’s mind, and his voice trailed off.

“You’ve got a sharp intuition.” Romello had a feeling what was going through Gazell’s mind.

“Were you using her as bait to try to draw out the culprits?” Gazell’s voice dropped several notches. An ordinary person would be shaking in their boots, hearing the hero speak like that.

Romello didn’t even bat an eyelash. “You’re jumping to conclusions. I’ll admit that the thought crossed my mind, but I didn’t know how strong she really was. I mean, I’d consider it if you think she’s strong enough...”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I can’t put her in that kind of danger!”

“I thought you’d say that. Fine, then. Stop glaring at me like that.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, come on now. Don’t be angry.” Romello’s voice grew more serious in response. This was the other side of him that he usually didn’t show here in the study at House Anderson. He was a veteran of many battles, fought on a different sort of battlefield than the general. “I said you have a sharp intuition, but I didn’t say you were *right*. The reason I’m not making a move and haven’t

told you to do anything yet is because I think it would put us at a disadvantage right now. I thought perhaps if I moved her a bit, the game board would be easier to manipulate, but there are other measures we can take without involving her.”

“You sure got serious all of a sudden.”

“That’s really your first response to that?”

“Hmph.”

Just then, they heard cheers coming from the sparring grounds. Romello automatically shifted his gaze in that direction. There were several men standing there, with Merellis in the center of the sparring circle. She had apparently finished Gazell’s punishment training and was now sparring with the other soldiers. It looked like she’d just won her match and several soldiers were on the ground around her.

“Is that truly your daughter? She’s amazing!” He blurted out. His amusement was clear in his voice. Romello had been gathering information about Merellis from various sources, but this was the first time he’d ever seen her in action. He was quite surprised. “Who could ever imagine that such a delicate little girl would be stronger than a soldier of the kingdom’s army!”

“She’s said some interesting things. ‘The movements around me feel slower and I can see them better.’ And ‘My hearing is sharpened. It’s like I can hear my opponent’s breath and the movement of each of the muscles in my body.’”

“Do you feel the same way?”

“Nope. I’m just an ordinary guy with better intuition than most.”

“Oh, please. Well, no matter. I’m glad I got to see that today. I’ll drop by again with some more liquor.”

“Next time bring me some from Macallan.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Romello bid farewell to Gazell and went back home. The minute he got there, he spotted Louis. It almost looked like he’d been waiting for him. “I’m back.”

“Welcome home. Could you please go back to your study now?” Louis had

just turned ten, but he looked and acted much older. He had a sharp, stern way about him that contributed to it. He carried himself not like a child, but like a responsible adult. Sometimes when Romello heard him speaking to other children, he felt like Louis was much different than them.

“That’s cold.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Don’t ask me. Come on. You should get back to work too,” Romello said with a cynical smile. *Maybe part of the reason he doesn’t act like a child is because of me*, he thought. Even though Louis was still young, Louis was already teaching him the ways of his job. He had done the same when he was a child, after all, as all the eldest sons of House Armelia did. Romello switched gears and focused on the pile of documents in front of him. “Hey, Louis...” He paused and called out.

“Yes?”

“I’ll do all those documents over there for you. Would you go over this stack and take care of them?”

Louis looked suspicious when his father handed him the pile of documents, but his expression changed once he looked at them. “This is...”

“You know without me having to explain it, don’t you? This is your first priority.”

“Of course. It would be dangerous even with just mercenaries...but I wasn’t expecting Rimmel to mobilize their troops...”

“I’m surprised you realized mercenaries were involved.”

“Well...it’s because I looked into where you’ve traveled lately. I didn’t figure it out on my own.”

“Still. There’s nothing more to do with the mercenaries though, I’ll take care of them. You’ll help me of course, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” Romello nodded and immersed himself in his work.

Ahh, it's coming. The clanking of wooden swords sounded so far away, but at the same time, my senses felt as if they were growing sharper. My own presence grew distant. My mind became clearer. My focus was on nothing but the battle between my opponent and myself. I saw everything so clearly that it seemed like his movements were getting slower. My hearing was so sharp that I heard his breaths and the movements of every muscle in my body. All of those things came together and helped me move as efficiently as possible.

The day I renewed my resolve was the day my senses began to sharpen even more. When the feeling started coming over me, I felt myself getting far away. It was strangely frightening, but it filled me with satisfaction at the same time. My vision was no longer just black and red like it was before. Now when I fought, vivid colors flooded my vision. It was beautiful and delightful.

"The winner is...Mer!" The instructor called out, snapping me back to reality.

"I lost. You're in great shape. You're even faster than the last time I fought you."

"Thank you, Kreuz."

I shook hands with him.

"Something good happen to you lately?"

"Something good? Hmm... I guess I'm just having fun."

"Fun?"

"Up until now, I thought it was my responsibility to become stronger." *For my revenge, to beat this senseless world. So I wouldn't lose anything else.* I just kept telling myself I had to become stronger, but I wouldn't be satisfied no matter how strong I had become. I kept telling myself it wasn't enough. "My goal of being stronger went away...but this is still all I have. And once I realized that, I felt hopeless for a while." I locked myself up in my room and rejected the outside world. I had felt so empty. I wanted to turn my gaze away from my sadness and just wanted time to hurry up and pass, but at the same time, I was afraid for each second to tick by.

"But...you and the other people around me taught me how important it was to look forward to the future. And since this is all I have, I decided to keep

honing my skills, toward a new goal. This time I don't feel like I *have* to get stronger. I just *want* to get stronger. Once I realized that, it took a lot of pressure off of me, and now it's simply fun. I know it might sound strange to say that training is fun though."

"It doesn't sound strange. But hey, if you've taken the first step toward a new goal, you've got my full support." Kreuz said warmly, giving me a kind smile. I smiled back at him. "How 'bout I take you out to eat to celebrate?"

"Sure!"

And so after training was over, I went out to eat with Kreuz and the others.

"I know I'm the one who invited you, but you sure can eat a lot, Mer."

"Huh?" I guess I'd been starving after training all day because I was demolishing my food. I realized it probably wasn't very ladylike...and I was the only one stuffing my face. The others were leisurely enjoying their food and drinks. "I was hungry from my training. This is the usual amount I eat though... I try not to eat too much so I don't gain weight. It would affect my performance, after all."

"No, no, that's not it. I just mean I'm surprised you even have the energy to eat like that after the hellish training the general puts you through!"

"Yeah, what he said! I'd probably puke!"

"Heck, I'd be puking *while* training!"

I half chuckled at everyone's comments. "I used to, actually." They all stopped and stared. No one moved for a bit. It was like time had frozen at our table.

"Did I...say something strange?" I asked, and everyone started moving again.

"N-no, it's just surprising..."

"Yeah, I can't even imagine *you* doing that."

"Yeah. You always go through it all with such ease, I never would've expected..."

"The general took me in to train me when I was very young. At first it was so tough I couldn't even eat. But humans are very adaptable, you know."

“Y-yeah... So, wait, you’ve been training like that ever since you were little?”

“At first it was impossible for me to get through it all, but I added more and more each day, little by little. It took a long time for me to think this training regimen was easy.”

“Easy...” Everyone’s expressions grew tense.

“By the way, is it really okay for you guys to be drinking in the middle of the day?” I wasn’t sure if I was even supposed to be allowed at a place like this, but I was surprised they were drinking so early. It made me feel closer to them when they invited me out like this, but I was the only one drinking fruit juice, of course.

“Yeah, well... We’re not on duty today, so...”

“Oh, you’re training even on your days off? That’s good.”

“The general’s training is popular with the army, of course, and the House Anderson guards. It’s basically like we’re wedging ourselves into the guards’ training, and there are a limited number of men who can participate. Even though we’re in his regiment, it’s not every day you can train with the general!”

“Yeah. The only way for rookie soldiers like us to get time with the general is if we spend our days off training.”

“We respect him, so I don’t mind spending my days off training with him. But the negative part is that I’m surrounded by guys all day, every day. I’ve got no chance to meet any women!”

“Don’t remind me! One day our flowers will bloom...” All of a sudden, the men got a faraway look in their eyes. I felt a sort of sadness about them.

“Don’t sound so tragic.” Kreuz looked kind of sad too.

“Someone who’s married has no idea what we’re going through!”

“Yeah! We’re surrounded by guys all the time, left and right! Ahh, it feels so empty!”

Hmm, so the reason why Kreuz is always so confident is because he’s married...

“I’m not a guy, though.” I wasn’t sure why they were counting me as one of them.

“Well, that’s true, but...”

“I know what you’re trying to say.” One of the men’s eyes started darting around. It seemed like the others knew what he was feeling.

“Mer’s more manly than some of the men here!” A few of them said at once.

Huh??? I was baffled.

“You never complain about your training even though some men would break under it. In fact, you even enjoy it! You’ve got some fortitude.”

“Then you train some more on your own, and even have more appetite than a man!”

“You appeared out of nowhere to rescue that little girl.”

“You’re way more manly than us!” They said in unison, hanging their heads. They let out a sigh but then started cracking up laughing.

“Let’s drink!”

“Yeah! All of us single guys should drink until midnight!”

“The bonds between single men will never be broken!”

“Oh, please. You know you’re gonna beat us to the punch!”

“Stop arguing, you two. We’re all in this together!”

They were getting rather excited and started drinking one glass after the other.

“Wait, if the bonds of you single guys will never be broken, doesn’t that mean your flowers will never bloom after all? Shouldn’t you just hurry up and get it over with?”

“Aw, come on. Some things in this world are better left unsaid. Just watch over us warmly, Mer.” Kreuz said after I pointed that out. He looked at the other guys fondly.

I nodded, and not wanting to make the situation worse, just watched over

them too. After that, I enjoyed a little more food and drink, and then the party came to an end. They took me back to the mansion and said goodbye at the gates as they were going to go back to the restaurant to drink some more.

“I have to go eat dinner at home at least on my days off or else my wife will be mad at me!” Kreuz had said with tears in his eyes and tried to run away. Unfortunately, the other guys caught him and dragged him along with them. “Mer, at least let me walk you into the mansion! Please? Come on, please? This is my only way out! I invited you after all, so I need to take responsibility for you until you get home safely!” He tearfully sought my help, but I just silently stared at him.

That’s because I was genuinely surprised that they were much quicker and more aggressive at trying to capture him than they were during training. I realized that him bringing up his wife must’ve lit a fire under them. It definitely wasn’t because I was afraid of them and acting like I didn’t know what was going on.

“MER!!!”

“Now, now, Kreuz. You don’t need Mer’s protection. The house is right through those gates, and it’s still light outside. But most of all, she’s stronger than us. She’ll be fine! Now come out drinking with us.”

As I heard their voices growing distant, I sent a silent cheer of encouragement after Kreuz.

The sun was just about to set. I felt like it would be a waste to go home so soon, so I decided to go up to the tower. Father was so strict lately that I couldn’t go out to town alone much. I wondered if he had told Kreuz and the others that they must take me back home themselves and that was why they’d walked me back. In that case, Kreuz was making the best decision.

The guards at the tower were used to me coming up there, so they let me go ahead. I kept on running up the stairs to the top. “Louis...” I murmured, seeing his familiar figure there, but I must have said it loudly enough for him to hear because he slowly turned around.

“Nice to see you again, Merry.” It had been a long time since I saw him. He looked a bit tired, but a soft smile spread across his face.

“Nice to see you too.”

“You look better than I thought you would.”

We hadn’t seen each other since the bandits had been killed. He seemed genuinely surprised, and I had to laugh.

“Sorry about that.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I really hounded you that day, and I’m sorry.” He bowed his head to me with a serious look on his face. It just made me laugh even more.

“Don’t apologize. I’ll admit that I was pretty irritated with you that day, but you were right.” My smile tightened as I spoke in a serious voice. I chose my words carefully to try to explain myself. “I was stuck in the past, and I’d left behind all the things that were important to me here in the present. Once the bandits were caught, I felt like I lost the meaning of my life. I just became so... empty.”

I felt like I had lost my guidepost and was plunged into the darkness. I feared the future. A shiver went down my spine when I imagined what would have happened if I were still stuck in that place.

“But something my brother said to me, and that letter you left me, made me decide to move on.”

“If you no longer have a goal, all you have to do is find a new one. You have time. There’s no need to rush your life.”

That was what he had written in his letter.

“But you’re alive. You’re alive!” I remembered what my brother had practically yelled and how serious he’d been.

It was because of both of those things that I was grateful for my life right now. I could finally look ahead to the future when I hadn’t been able to before. It felt like time had finally started moving again for me in that moment.

“So, thanks,” I said. This time Louis smiled back.

“You’re kind of weird.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. That hostility you used to have about you—like if someone got too close you’d stab them or something—it’s gone now.” Kreuz had said something similar.

“Maybe you’re right. I’m just having a lot of fun right now.”

“Really? Well, I’m glad.”

I suddenly felt a little shy and awkwardly walked over to take a seat by him. I sat down because I couldn’t look at him. If I just looked down at the view, it wouldn’t be weird if I didn’t make eye contact with him since he was still standing up. “By the way... How’d you know that my goal was for those bandits to get caught?”

“I didn’t. I just had a hunch, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

He took a seat next to me. “Hungry?” He took out something wrapped in paper. “These are buns from Old Man Faro’s place.”

“Sure. Thanks.” I picked up one of the six buns and shoved the whole thing in my mouth. An unbelievably spicy taste filled my mouth. “What the—?!”

“Oh, you got the dud.” Louis said casually when he saw my reaction.

I coughed several times. “What do you mean, dud?!”

“He sells a pack of six, all different flavors. Five of them are yummy, but for some reason there’s always one that’s super spicy. Even though I know there’s one dud, I still keep buying them. They’re famous. I heard lately it’s popular to buy a pack to share with your friends and see who gets the spicy one.” He handed me a jug of water, and I quickly opened it up and started drinking.

Even though I emptied it, my mouth still felt like it was on fire.

“I was thinking I’d never seen anyone shove the whole thing in their mouth before...but I guess you didn’t know about it. I can’t believe you got the dud your very first time eating one...”

I could tell he was stifling his laughter.

“If I would’ve known, I wouldn’t have eaten the whole thing!” I protested. Louis couldn’t hold back his laughter anymore. At first I pouted at his reaction, but at some point I started laughing too. Before long, my mouth didn’t feel like it was on fire anymore. “Well, if I just ate the dud that must mean the rest are fine, right? Can I have another one?”

“Of course.”

I hesitantly bit into the bun he gave me, but this one was delicious. “It’s really good. I wonder why he puts the dud in with the rest of the pack?”

“No idea. It may be a dud, but it’s a hit with people who like spicy foods.”

“I really don’t get it.” And I was speaking from experience. “Do you go into town a lot, Louis?” If the guards let a kid like him pass through, then his dad must be someone really important. I wondered why he was allowed to go out into town alone.

“Yeah. But I’m sure as I get older, I won’t be able to anymore. I won’t have the time, and I won’t be able to because of my position. I won’t be as free as I am now, so I want to enjoy it while I can.

“Hmm...”

Louis took one of the buns and started eating it. “At least I was able to discover delicious food like this.”

“I’ve been going to town a lot lately too. All I thought about before was my training, so there are a ton of things I don’t know. Like Old Man Faro’s buns.”

“Oh, do you like going out into town?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Yeah, I like it now.”

“You should go explore more, then. The more you know, the better. I think there’s nothing that makes you happier than discovering new things, after all.”

“Yeah.”

“Next time you should go with me to try some places at the market. I can give you recommendations.”

“Really?! You promise?”

It was a promise for the future. A step in a new direction.

“Sure.”

It was a promise that made my heart race.

“Hmm...” *If I moved there, I wouldn’t be able to move here. But if I moved here, I wouldn’t be able to move there...* I stared at the game board, but I couldn’t come up with any good moves. Rather, there weren’t any good moves left. “I retire.” I reluctantly gave up. “You’ve gotten even better than last time, Brother.”

“There’s still someone I can’t beat,” he said with a wry smile, and I immediately thought of Uncle Romello. He must really be amazing if even my brother couldn’t beat him.

“He hasn’t been around lately. I wonder if he’s out drinking somewhere again.”

“Who knows? Maybe he’s just busy with work.”

“Work? I honestly can’t even picture Uncle Romello at work.” I had only ever seen him drinking alcohol. On top of that, he seemed like such a free spirit that I just couldn’t imagine him working at some company or doing some important job for the kingdom.

“Sometimes people have sides to them that can surprise you. Just like you, for example.”

“Huh? How am I like Uncle Romello?”

“You might be doing different things, but you’re the same at the core. You’re both hiding ferocious claws.”

I gave him a puzzled look. “Well, thanks for playing with me. I should go to bed.” I glanced at the clock and stood up. It was getting late. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

The next day, I got up to do some self-guided training before the sun rose. After I was finished, I ate and then started my studies. I didn’t have any talent

for strategy at all, so that wasn't part of my studies. Father had instead insisted that I study the very basics of what the daughter of a noble needed to know. This was apparently his strategy to cut down on my free time so I didn't go out into town. Of course, I understood why it was necessary. He knew that unless Kreuz or a member of the guard was with me, I'd find a way to go to town and stick my nose in where it didn't belong. I had a prior record of doing so after all, so it's not like I could complain...

Still, I had to wonder what my father was thinking, telling me to study and giving me the materials but no tutor. I suppose that since the story was that I was his daughter's bodyguard, it was difficult to get a tutor for me. That left me no other choice but to study by myself.

Luckily, we had a fairly sizable library at the mansion. I could find any books I needed to help with my studies there, and if I was really stuck, I could just ask my very smart brother for help. Yesterday's game happened because I'd dropped by to ask for help on my homework, and when we were done, we just naturally started playing. It had become somewhat of a daily ritual for me to go to his room for homework help and a game. I wasn't sure what he really gained from playing against me, but I had to admit that playing every day had improved my skills a bit. That just went to show how much I was relying on my brother lately.

Also, not only did my father not hire a tutor for me, but he knew nothing about the proper etiquette of a young woman of a noble family. So luckily for me, he had made an exception about that and wasn't forcing me to learn etiquette.

I'd finished my quota for the day, so I was left with nothing else to do. I could be a good girl and stay inside the house, or...

I looked out the window and saw the House Anderson guards doing their training.

"Shrey!" It was too hard for me to sit still once I saw that, so I decided to go out and join them.

"Hey, Mer!" I went over to a group of them who were taking a short break and watching the others. Shrey was the deputy commander of the guard, and I

had trained with him many times before.

“It’s been a while since I saw you. Did something happen?”

“No, I just went back home to the march for a bit. Wanted to make sure everything was safe.”

Since the House Anderson guards were trained by my father, they were the most elite, toughest warriors in the kingdom. They had basically the same duties that the soldiers of the army had and were tasked with ensuring the safety of the march. They were essentially a natural deterrent since they had endured my father’s tough training. But naturally, my father didn’t personally need bodyguards; they didn’t have set duties. And they served our family, so we couldn’t just dismiss them.

“I see. So? How are things back in the march?”

“Same as always. No one in their right mind would try anything in the domain ruled by Master Gazell anyway.”

“That’s good.”

“By the way, Mer... I heard you’ve grown a bit wild lately.”

“Me, wild? I don’t remember doing anything like that...” Father had been keeping a close eye on me as of late, so it was difficult to go out into town alone. I also hadn’t been involved in any incidents since I rescued that girl.

“I was just joking. Kreuz told me what happened before.”

“Oh.” I chuckled dryly.

“Here.” Shrey handed me a practice sword. “Show me how strong you’ve gotten. I heard you’ve beaten Kreuz now.” He grinned at me, and I saw competitive spirit gleaming in his eyes. He was hungry for a battle. He had *definitely* been trained by my father. “What’s with that look on your face?” He asked with a laugh, interrupting my thoughts.

“My face?” I didn’t know what he meant. I started patting around on my face, wondering if there was something on it, then I realized the corners of my lips were upturned. Apparently, I was grinning without even realizing it. I guess I really had no room to talk. I had been imagining fighting with Shrey, and I guess

I got excited about it. "Let's go."

"It's on!" I started running. As I ran, I sharpened my senses to read his movements. Suddenly a sword came slicing toward me at incredible speed. But I stopped it.

"Heh." He grinned at me. "Wasn't expecting you to block me so easily." He said, then started moving again. I watched the way he moved his arms, where he looked, and the casual way he swung his sword. I moved the exact same way. "You really have gotten stronger." He said as he put some distance between us.

"So have you," I answered as I started moving again.

"Whoa!" Our swords crashed against each other several times. His reactions were very swift, and every time I thought I had him, it wasn't enough to finish him off. When I stepped too far toward him, a strong blow followed. I smiled again as this went on. This was fun; I was just barely getting attacks in, and just barely defending myself. One wrong move would cost one of us the match. There was a tension and excitement about it all that made me feel alive. But all fun times must come to an end. I knocked Shrey's sword out of his hand and thrust mine toward his throat.

"You win."

"Thank you." I pulled my sword away.

"You really have gotten stronger. I thought I had too, but it looks like I've got a long way to go."

"That's not true. You almost had me several times."

"Oh, stop. Ahh, now I just wanna train some more when I get home."

"What are you talking about, Shrey?"

"Huh?" He froze.

"We've still got plenty of time until sundown. Let's have another match."

"U-uhh, well... I think I have to go give my report to the general!"

"Master Gazell won't be home until after sundown anyway. Or was there

something else you had to do?”

“No...”

“Then shall we have another match?” I smiled innocently at him. He relented with a smile and then picked up his sword.

After that we had several more matches, and then I went to spar with some other members of the guard. I didn’t even really have to concentrate that hard. I just read the atmosphere of each match because I already basically knew how they moved. They’d been there watching over me ever since I started training, so they happily went along with my requests for a match. I was touched, and it made me really happy.

When I faced off against men from the capital, they treated me like equals. A big reason for that was probably because Kreuz was their leader. Out of the Anderson guard, the soldiers, and the knights, Kreuz paid the most attention to me. It was probably because I was in an environment with a bunch of men who weren’t always friendly, but he wanted to make sure they didn’t underestimate me. I felt proud that even though they were hard on me, they treated me like a full-fledged soldier.

Training with the Anderson guard made me feel like I was back home. In contrast to their easy movements, training at the capital was tense, almost like work. Not that I knew what work felt like, but I felt like I could imagine it.

No one method was better than the other, but I felt that both were necessary to help me grow.

“Ah, Kreuz!” I said when I saw him show up at the sparring grounds.

“Hey, Mer. Looks like you’re keeping busy.” He let out a chuckle as he glanced at the men lying on the ground around me.

“What are you doing here today? Master Gazell isn’t home yet.” I smiled at his reaction.

“Oh, really? It’s a shame I missed him. Well, no matter. I was in the neighborhood, so I decided to drop by.”

“Hey, Kreuz.”

“Oh, Shrey! I didn’t know you were here.” Shrey got up and went over to talk to Kreuz.

The two of them were the same age, and since Kreuz showed up at the Anderson mansion quite frequently for training, they’d seen each other a lot and hit it off in no time. “Looks like Mer must’ve taken care of you the moment you got back.”

“More or less. I was curious to see how much stronger she got since I heard she beat you. She was great.”

“Bet she was.”

“Anyway... You free after this, Kreuz?”

“Hm? Yeah, I am. I just finished my shift.”

“Then let’s go drinking tonight. It’s been a while since I was in the capital last. Come along with me.”

“Ahh, sure. Why don’t we invite the other guys after they’re finished with their training too?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

“How about you, Mer?” Kreuz suddenly turned toward me and asked.

“Are you sure I can come?”

“Yeah, of course. We all worked here and sweated together, right? You’re our comrade. Let’s celebrate Shrey’s return to the capital.”

“Okay! Thank you!”

And so I went to town with them again. Father came home right before we left, they both gave him their individual reports, and I notified him that I was going with the two of them.

“Well, I’m sure you won’t try anything funny as long as you’re with Shrey and Kreuz,” he said and gave me his permission. I thought it was questionable that he was worried about *me* being the one to cause an incident, and I almost said so, but since I had a prior record, I kept my mouth shut. Sometimes there was safety in silence after all, so I chose to be wise.

At any rate, the city came alive once night fell. We were all pretty calm in comparison as we entered a relatively expensive establishment. It was actually my second time coming here as Kreuz and the others had brought me before.

“Oh, Shrey! Long time no see! You gonna be in the capital for a while?” As soon as Shrey took a seat, a woman from the back came over and greeted him. She was Madame Caluis, the owner of the place.

“Not sure, honestly.”

“Ha ha. Well, I guess it’s good that you’ve got work. Work hard for a while, get married, and then come here to relax.”

“I come here plenty, Madame,” Shrey said with a small chuckle. Madame Caluis’s response was a charming smile on her face.

I looked away from their conversation and scanned the establishment. There were many women dressed in beautiful clothes here. It seemed like business was thriving tonight.

“Oh, my! You brought Mer with you again!”

“It’s nice to see you again, Madame.”

“You’re always such a polite little girl! You really are so adorable.” She looked at me with sparkling eyes and patted my head. She had been very fond of me the last time I came here too. It felt so good to have such a beautiful woman dote on me. I felt people’s gazes prodding at me from all directions, but I didn’t care. “What would you like to drink tonight, honey? I bought all kinds of fruit, just for you!”

“Really? Thank you so much, Madame.”

“Let me take you over to your seat.” She took me by the hand and started walking. I was so enraptured by Madame’s conversation that I didn’t notice what others were saying around me.

“Hey, Kreuz. Why’s Madame so fond of Mer?”

“Well, Madame was attacked by a pickpocket, and Mer got back her things. She appeared out of nowhere and blocked off the culprit’s path. He was screaming mad, but Mer beat him to a pulp. She didn’t ask for anything in

return from Madame and even acted as her bodyguard to escort her safely home! Madame said, 'You're so adorable yet even more masculine than a boy!' Mer totally forgot it even happened, though."

"Madame's a veteran on her own kind of battlefield, but Mer won her over, huh? Impressive."

"In more ways than one!"

I took my seat, and a bunch of other ladies joined us at our table. Madame was next to me and was waiting on me hand and foot. I enjoyed chatting with everyone, and the ladies really made our conversation much more fun.

"This fruit juice is good. Thank you so much, Madame."

"I'm happy you like, Mer! I'm glad I got that fruit for you."

Madame smiled brightly. I wondered if she didn't usually smile like that, because the other ladies at the table seemed a bit startled and blinked at her in surprise.

"You really do love Mer, don't you, Madame? Last time she came here with Kreuz and the others, and now Shrey is here... How do you know them all, Mer?" One of the ladies asked me.

"She trains with us," Kreuz answered.

"What?! At that young an age? But you all are very strong, right? How in the world could she train with you?"

"She just does. Otherwise, she wouldn't be here with us," Kreuz said with a smile.

"But I heard that your training is really tough. Are you all right, Mer?"

"I'm a guard, just like Shrey. I need to become stronger for my mistress." I answered according to the story my father had made up. The women looked even more surprised but accepted my answer. Their reactions were pretty entertaining. I wondered what they would think if they knew my true identity, although of course I would never tell them.

"I see... It sounds like you're working very hard for your age!"

“Oh, I don’t know...” I answered shyly, feeling heat collect in my cheeks.

“I have a younger sister. I think she’s about your age, Mer.”

“Oh, really? I bet she’s really pretty, just like you.”

The woman I was speaking to had straight, platinum blonde hair and was incredibly beautiful. “Oh, stop!” She giggled in response. She really was gorgeous, and I was sure of it when I saw Guntz, who was sitting next to Shrey, start to blush when he looked at her.

Suddenly, I looked down at myself. No one would ever say the clothes I wore were feminine. And both Kreuz and Shrey said I was more manly than even some of the guys. I didn’t mind them saying that, and until now it had never really bothered me. But as I sat there surrounded by those gorgeous women, I started to feel self-conscious.

“What’s wrong, Mer?”

Perhaps my emotions had shown on my face, or perhaps it was just a woman’s intuition, but one of the ladies looked concerned.

“I was just thinking how pretty you all are.”

“Hee hee... Thanks! But you’re very pretty too, Mer.”

“Am I?”

“Of course you are. There’s no need to rush it. Girls always blossom at exactly the right time. I just know you’ll grow into a beautiful woman who’ll make any man’s head turn, if that’s what you want.”

Honestly, I couldn’t imagine making any man’s head turn because of my beauty, but her words of encouragement did make me feel better.

“Mer, if you ever need to talk about anything, we’re here to listen. I know you have a lot of friends who care about you, but sometimes there are things you can only ask other girls, right?”

“Thank you. I’m sorry, I don’t know your name...”

“It’s Lurulia!”

“Nice to meet you, Lurulia.”

That night, I made friends with all the other ladies who worked for Madame, and we had a wonderful time chatting.

A few days later, I went back up to the tower after I was finished training. Father had gone back to the march, and you know what they say about when the cat's away...

"Long time no see, Merry." Louis was there.

"Hi, Louis." We hadn't planned on meeting or anything. The only thing I even knew about him was his first name, so there was no way for me to contact him. "Have you gotten skinnier?" To be honest, "gaunt" might have been a more fitting term.

He chuckled in response. "I've been really quite busy lately. I'm glad to see you look well, though."

"Thanks." I looked down at the view below us, and he did the same.

"By the way..." he said all of a sudden. "Remember how we promised to go into town together?" For some reason, my chest felt tight as he spoke. "Do you want to go do that now?"

"Sure!"

We climbed back down the stairs together.

"This is Old Man Faro's shop. And over there is a shop called Rusbury..."

"Oh, I've heard of it! That bakery is really famous." The soldiers talked about it a lot.

"Have you ever had it before?"

"Unfortunately not." None of the soldiers ever went there themselves, so I hadn't had a chance to tag along yet.

"Would you like to go?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've been wanting to eat there myself for a while now."

“Okay, thanks! Let’s go!”

The two of us walked toward the bakery. There were a lot of people there, so I figured it must really be popular.

“Do you know what you want?”

“Hang on, I can’t decide whether I want a pie or a scone.” I bit my lip, seriously conflicted as I looked at the display. They were both popular, and when I looked around, I noticed that many of the people sitting down were eating both.

“Okay, we’ll get one pie and one scone,” Louis went ahead and ordered and paid before I even finished deciding.

“But I haven’t decided yet, Louis.”

“You want to eat both, right? I got both so we can share.” He said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but I was shocked.

“Are you sure?”

“Why are you being so shy?” He asked with a chuckle.

“Well, at least let me pay...” I started to say, but he quietly shook his head.

“Just let the boy have his moment and pay, sweetie. It’s a date, after all!” the old lady behind the counter said to me as she handed Louis the food.

“Da—?!” My heart started pounding like crazy hearing that word. I’d never thought about dates before, much less ever thought I’d go on one!

“Oh, Merry! There’s an open table over there... Hm? What’s wrong?” I was completely flustered, but Louis seemed as calm as ever. I was sure he had heard the old lady too. It bothered me a little that he could be so casual when I was panicking.

“I-It’s nothing. Thanks, Louis.”

It was no wonder why this place was so popular; everything was delicious! Once we finished eating, we started walking around town again. However...I was still thinking about what the old lady said to me, and Louis was *still* completely unbothered. It made me feel a bit foolish to be the only one self-

conscious about it, and I heaved an inward sigh.

Just then, I saw a shop with beautiful clothing on display in the window. I wondered if Louis would still feel calm and collected if I was the type of girl who wore pretty clothes like that. For that matter, did he even know I was a girl? After all, I spoke plainly with him, like one of the guys. Well, it was too late to change myself now. I'd probably even be too embarrassed to wear clothes like that...though I *did* see a hairpin that I really liked.

"Hey, are you all right?" I must have been spacing out, because all of a sudden, Louis leaned in close and checked on me.

"Whoa!"

He chuckled at my reaction. "Sorry, sorry... You seemed like you were spacing out. Are you tired?"

"N-no, I was just thinking."

"Okay." Louis answered and then started walking again.

It was nice of him to be concerned, but he could have at least said something else, I thought selfishly. Once again, I was so lost in my thoughts that I ran right into a passerby. "Ah..." There were so many people around that just stopping for a moment made me lose sight of Louis. I let out a deep sigh. We were supposed to be having fun together. Why was I being such an idiot and getting caught up in these negative thoughts?

"Merry!" As I stood there feeling sorry for myself, Louis came back to get me.

"Sorry I got lost, Louis."

"I'm just glad I found you again. Sorry I walked off so quickly. Come on." He held out his hand to me like it was no big deal. "Take it. So you won't get lost again."

"What?!"

He grabbed my hand and fell into step beside me as we started walking through town again. Spending time with Louis was so much fun that I decided to stop thinking about negative things. I really wanted to enjoy this fun time we were having together.

“I heard there’s a weapons shop nearby... Look, there it is!” Louis said suddenly.

That certainly got my attention. “A weapons shop?! I want to see!”

Louis chuckled at my reaction, and we headed toward it. This street was probably the largest area in the capital. The shop was on the corner. We went inside, and it was filled with all kinds of weapons and armor. I recognized a lot of it, but there were many things I’d never seen before as well. Even just looking was a lot of fun. Its only flaw was that it was just a bit dusty in there. I kept coughing, but it was still really exciting to explore.

“Welcome... Oh, it’s you.” An old man who seemed to be the owner emerged from the back and approached Louis.

“Why do you sound so disappointed?” Louis responded in a joking manner. Obviously the two of them knew each other.

“I was wondering why you hadn’t been by lately, and here you are bringing a pretty young lady with you! Why are you wasting your time here? Go on and show her a good time somewhere else!”

“She’s the one who wanted to come in here.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir. I like looking at weapons... I’m really interested in them, in fact. Is it all right if we stay a while and look around?” I asked.

The old man stared silently at me. But a few moments later, he chuckled. “You’re serious, aren’t you? What an odd one!”

For some reason, those words hurt me. I’d been worried about whether Louis found me pretty, but my curiosity won out and I’d asked him to take me here. I guess it was my own fault after all.

“Well, no matter. Feel free to look around.”

Louis laughed at the man’s response. “Good for you. The owner here doesn’t really care about selling anything. If he doesn’t like you, he’ll kick you out of his shop.”

“He must be very responsible,” I replied. After all, it *was* a weapons shop. The

things sold here were made to hurt people. The owner surely understood that, and that was why he could probably identify people who wouldn't take that seriously and prioritized that over making a profit. He understood the true purpose of weapons.

"Hey, Miss. I got a special one over here. Wanna see?"

"I'd love to!"

The old man brought out several swords from the back. They were made from all different workshops. He carefully explained each one as he showed them to me. "You wanna hold one you like?" I took him up on his offer and picked up one that caught my eye. "Now, that one is a heavy one. It's from Ridley's workshop. Might make your attacks more powerful, but not even I'd be able to heft that one in battle!"

I moved a distance away from the two of them and easily swung it through the air. But it was much heavier than the sword I was used to, so I couldn't move how I wanted to.

"You do look like you know what you're doing, Miss," the old man murmured. I flashed him a wry smile. And then he smiled back at me—sadly. I had a feeling he knew just from watching how hard I had trained to get to this point and how much time I had spent on the way of the sword. "I don't wanna pry or anything, but do you have someone precious to you?" He asked with sympathy in his voice.

"Of course I do!" I responded emphatically. The heavy mood in the air disappeared, and a soft smile came over his face.

"I see, I see. Well, make sure to take care of 'em. People precious to you understand you and stick by your side. Just like this young man here."

"Thank you."

After that, the old man started talking about swords again.

"I'll come back again sometime."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing ya."

I had really warmed up to the old man, and once we bid him goodbye, Louis

and I left his shop. The sun was starting to set.

“Thanks, Louis. I had a lot of fun today.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

The two of us walked side by side back to the tower. Louis led the way as we climbed up to the top.

“I always come here, but I like being here at this time of day the best,” he said. He was right. The sky was a pale purple color. The darkness of night mingled with the reds of the sunset, creating a gorgeous color in the sky. I looked toward the left and saw the crimson sun sinking below the horizon. And if I looked to the right, I could see the moon glowing in the dim light. Adults and children below us were all on their way home, so it looked like there were even more people out than usual.

“Hey, Louis...?”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember how you said before that you wanted to protect the kingdom so all the people down there would live without worries?”

“Yeah.”

“It took me a while, but I finally understand that feeling.”

He didn’t respond. He was quiet, as if waiting for me to continue.

“When I no longer had the opportunity to kill my enemies like I wanted to, I felt like I had nothing left. I asked myself what I wanted to do next. What I wanted to become. I thought a lot about it, and I ultimately realized that I didn’t want anyone else to have to grieve the loss of a loved one like I did. I know how much it hurts, so I never want someone else to go through that. And I decided that’s why I would continue swinging my sword.”

“I have a feeling you were overthinking it,” Louis said. I gave him a puzzled look. “That’s exactly what wanting to protect someone feels like.”

I had to laugh. He was right, after all. Then I remembered the soldiers who trained with me, who were following in my father’s footsteps. I wanted to keep training with them so that my loved ones would continue smiling. “Thanks,

Louis.”

He gave me a small smile. “I didn’t really do anything. You’re the one who came to that conclusion.”

“I know. But I just wanted to thank you.”

“I see.” He smiled a little. He didn’t show much emotion on his face, but I could tell that he was smiling this time. “Oh, I almost forgot. Here.” All of a sudden, he handed me a package.

“What is it?”

“Open it up and find out.” I went ahead and opened it. A pretty hairpin was inside, the same one I stared at when we were walking around town.

“Louis, this is...!” I blurted out in shock.

“I noticed you looking at it.”

“I-I was, but...there’s no way that will look good on me.” It was cute and delicate—it definitely wouldn’t suit me. I was a girl who had just gotten excited over a weapons shop.

“Sure it will,” he said and tucked it into my hair. “Yep. It looks great on you.”



My cheeks felt hot. I was so shy and happy, my mind became a total blank. But... “Thanks, but I can’t accept this.” My hesitation won out.

“It’s to congratulate you on your new chapter,” he said.

“What?”

“You found a new path, and this is a gift to celebrate that. We shared the same worry, right? I wanted to do something for you, so please accept it. I mean, what am I going to do with this thing if you don’t?” He gave a rare joke, and I had to laugh.

“Thanks, Louis,” I said as I gently reached up to touch the hairpin so it didn’t break. It went without saying that that hairpin was the most precious gift I ever received.

“So bittersweet...”

A few days later, I went to Madame’s establishment by myself to ask for some advice. I asked her how I could become a pretty girl worthy of that hairpin that Louis gave me. He said it looked good on me, but I was just hoping to find out how I could get a little prettier, if it was even possible. I tried to think of someone in my family I could ask, but there wasn’t anyone. Plus, I was afraid to tell them I’d gone out to town without Father’s permission again.

I then remembered how beautiful Madame and her girls were, so I thought maybe she could help and visited her establishment. But when I brought it up, the ladies were nosy and asked a million questions about Louis, so I ended up telling them all about him. They were all looking at me with soft, fond looks in their eyes, and it made me feel embarrassed.

“Um, anyway... How can I become beautiful like you ladies?” I asked again, and they laughed.

“What in the world are you talking about, Mer?” Lurulia said with a giggle.

I guess it was a total lost cause for me to try to be pretty. I was just about to give up when Madame spoke up. “Now, now, girls. You have to tell her or she won’t understand. Mer has the completely wrong idea!” she chastised them.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mer. But that question was just so funny to me.” Lurulia giggled and reached out toward my cheek. “You already have the magic of what makes a girl beautiful! It’s just funny to hear you ask how you can become beautiful when you’ve already got it. That’s all.”

“Magic...?”

“It’s a feeling! Remember what I said before? Girls who want to be beautiful will always become beautiful!”

“That’s right! Especially a girl in love!” The women started caressing my cheeks.

“L-Love?!”

“Of course! You’re in love, Mer.”

“That’s right. This is definitely something a girl in love thinks about.”

They laughed at my reaction.

Love...love...*love*?!

“Oh, no, don’t tell me you only just realized it?” One of the girls laughed as I turned red.

“You want to become beautiful for him, right?” Lurulia asked, and I nodded. “And being with him puts you through a whirlwind of emotions, but it still makes you happy, right?” I nodded again. “Has any other boy ever made you feel that way?” I shook my head. “Well, isn’t that your answer? Well, maybe it’s not for me to say, but if you look inside yourself, I think you’ll find the answer.”

I thought about Louis. I tried to think about him without any worries. And just thinking about him made my heart race. It made me happy. It was a special feeling I’d never felt for anyone else before. If this special feeling was called love...then I guess I was in love with him.

“Anyway, girls in love naturally become prettier!” Another lady said. I gave her a puzzled look.

“Oh! You don’t believe us, do you?” Lurulia said sharply. I wasn’t sure how to answer. “Let me ask you this, Mer. Have you been taking better care of your hair every day than you had before?”

I...had. I asked Nana for some tips on making my hair look prettier, hoping that it would improve things a bit, and I'd been doing those things every day.

"Did you do that before you started thinking about him?" I shook my head no.

"Your skin looks like it's glowing more than it did before too. Did you start doing something different?" Another lady with very sharp intuition asked me that, and I nodded again. I asked Nana for some tips on how to make my skin look better too, so I was doing that along with my hair care every day.

"See? So when you do more and more little things like that, they add up. There aren't any shortcuts to beauty; it's something that happens gradually over time."

"And Mer has a good foundation. It won't take long at all for her to turn heads with her looks."

"That's right! First off, Mer, you need to have confidence. If you don't believe in yourself, then who will?" That was surprisingly deep, and I nodded seriously.

"There you go. Now, just keep working to improve yourself little by little. We're cheering you on, okay?"

"Thank you, ladies."

"Oh, and Mer? Could you tell us a little more about your bittersweet love story?"

The ladies' eyes glinted with excitement.

"Huh?"

The ladies asked me a million more questions about Louis after that.

Swords clashed and clanged together once again.

"The winner is...Mer!"

I wiped off my sweat, thrilled that I was the victor.

"You're in really great shape lately, Mer." Kreuz had been watching my match.

"Thanks, Kreuz." Even though I began trudging down the rough, tumultuous

path of beauty, I was still working hard at my combat training. Ever since I set a clear goal for myself, I had spent much of my days immersed in my training. Kreuz was right—I really was in great shape because of it.

“Let’s go again, Mer!” My opponent was still kneeling on the ground, but his eyes were sparkling.

“Sure.”

He didn’t even have to ask. The more I sparred, the more it became a part of me. And now that I was finished with my routine for the day, I sparred with several more guys, did some solo training, and then went back home.

“Master Pax.” I saw my brother on the way to my room and called out to him. “How are your studies for your entrance exams going?” He was studying to get into a new school, one that was a special academy just for the children of nobles. The curriculum was supposed to be very advanced, and it was also supposed to improve their relationships with other nobles. I knew that my brother would be just fine with the academics part.

“I’m almost done with it. There wasn’t actually much for me to study to begin with.”

“I see... I’ll be sad when you leave, Master Pax.”

Students at the academy lived in the dorms, so my brother would be away for quite a while.

“Aw, don’t say that. I’ll come back during breaks.”

“Make sure to tell me lots of stories about the academy, then.”

“I will.” My brother sneaked over to me and whispered, “Although you’ll be there in three years.”

“I know. But I’m not thrilled about it.”

“You’re not?”

“No. Unlike you, I’m not great at academics. But most of all, I still want to use all my time for training.” It wouldn’t be a complete waste, but if I had to live in the dorms, I wouldn’t be able to train seriously. I wasn’t even sure if I’d be able to continue my solo exercises, for that matter. Honestly, I wanted to do

everything I could to avoid being sent to this academy so I could stay home and train.

“I see. Well, you’ve got three years. You have plenty of time to think about the future.”

“Yeah...”

I nodded, and he patted my head. “By the way, I’m going home to the march,” he murmured, as if just remembering.

“What?”

“There are some things I need to take care of before I go to school. I haven’t been home in a long while, so I decided I want to do it before I leave. Want me to bring you back anything?”

“No, not really. Are you sure you’ll be all right, Master Pax?”

“I have completed Father’s basic training too, you know. And I’ll be taking guards with me. I appreciate your concern, but I’ll be fine.” He smiled wryly at me, but I was still worried.

It was only natural for me to worry. There was the incident with Mother, and I had been attacked too. But the days passed, and finally it was the day that my brother was to set off for home. And there I was on horseback, stealthily following him. I knew that Father would be enraged with me later, but I was just too worried about my brother to let him go. I stayed far enough behind that I wouldn’t rouse suspicion as I followed. They were being very cautious, and a large number of guards were accompanying him. They were all tough fighters, Shrey being one of them. As I checked who was part of the convoy, I realized that there were soldiers from the kingdom’s army mixed in with them. But why? At first I thought it was just my imagination, but I recognized them from training with them daily, so I knew I wasn’t wrong. And not only that, but even Kreuz, the deputy commander of the army, was amongst them.

This was hard to believe. Even if Father was worried about my brother, there was no way he would use a soldier from the army for his own personal use. What in the world was going on? I had a very uncomfortable feeling inside that was hard to describe. I didn’t have a problem with who was going along with

them, but that feeling of discomfort made me continue trailing them.

We left the capital and continued through the serene countryside. My brother and those in the front went down a busy road, so it wasn't obvious that I was following them. Still, I was wearing a hooded cloak just in case.

This trip made me realize that it had been a long time since I left the capital. Meanwhile, I was sure someone had already found the note I'd left behind. I could easily imagine my father blowing his top once he found out I followed my brother. I wondered what kind of punishment would be waiting for me when I returned, and that made it even harder to want to turn around. I was worried about just how angry he'd be, but I knew what I was doing would make him sick with worry, so I had to accept the punishment.

I was afraid of my father's anger, but I was mostly afraid of having regrets later. If something happened to my brother, I would never forgive myself. I wasn't going to let the fear of my father's anger make me back down. I was going to continue this journey and protect my brother, no matter what! I continued down the path with that resolve. Unfortunately, there was another problem to continuing my journey: money. Traveling cost a lot of money, and since I was doing this trip in secret, I couldn't borrow any from my family. I brought all the money I'd saved up over time, but the coin purse around my neck felt much lighter than I'd expected. I wasn't sure if the extra cash I'd sewn into my clothes would be enough either. My money dwindled as the days went on, and I was starting to panic a little, but I couldn't turn back.

I decided I'd cut down on my lodging costs first. I wanted to stay at the same inn as my brother just in case he was attacked, but I couldn't afford to. After I found out which inn he was staying at, I'd find the cheapest one that was as close to his as possible and stay there. I also tried to keep my food and drink costs as low as I could. It was tough and sometimes it had me close to tears, but I kept on following my brother.

Finally, we were almost at the march. There were fewer people on the road, which made it difficult for me to keep following him. I ended up going off the main road and made my own trail. I was a little afraid of how wild I was becoming, but I kept going anyway. If he arrived there safely, I'd turn back. But just as that thought crossed my mind, I sensed a number of individuals nearby.

A group had appeared to attack my brother! I immediately went to check out the situation. Who were they? They seemed way more well equipped than your average bandits. I had the feeling they weren't just out to attack any old noble, but they were specifically after the Anderson family.

The guards and the soldiers were working together to fight them off, but I could tell even from this distance that their cooperation was clumsy at best. I couldn't blame them, of course—they belonged to two entirely different groups. But as a result, none of them were fighting to their full ability. That was even more apparent to me since I'd spent so much time watching them train.

The enemy had strength in numbers, and they were gradually closing in on my brother. Seeing this, I grabbed the reins and urged my horse to go faster. I felt anger rising up inside of me. How dare they target my brother!

"Mer?!" Shrey was the first one to notice me as he fought.

"Anderson Guard! Protect Master Pax!" I shouted as I slaughtered one of the enemies.

"I owe you one!" Shrey immediately took the guard to close rank around my brother and engaged the enemies who were trying to attack my brother from behind.

I had made it, just in time. I let out a small sigh of relief. I then set my sights on the enemies in front of me. They seemed confused by my sudden appearance, but it didn't take long for faint smiles to appear on their faces.

"This is no place for a kid like you! Get outta here!" One of the enemies yelled at me as he came close. I easily sliced his neck open. My blood felt hot, like it was boiling inside of me, but my mind was surprisingly clear, like I'd just had cold water splashed over my head. My mind and body were working in perfect harmony and focused on this battle.

"What's it say about you if you got killed by a kid?" I said calmly as I looked down on him.

Now I was no longer sneaking up on them—I was facing the enemy head-on. It was so silent, it was like time had stopped.

"Pathetic. I can't feel any resolve or conviction in the way you fight! It's

pathetic!" I continued.

"Huh? Resolve? Conviction? What good does that do you?!" A group of them charged at me at once.

Despite this situation, my heart felt very calm and my mind was unclouded. "Soldiers! Show these pathetic fools that you've been trained by General Gazell! Show them the meaning of true strength, forged by conviction! Show them a true battle!" I yelled at the soldiers from the army who were behind me, and I heard rousing cheers in response. "Follow me!" I charged toward the enemy. The soldiers advanced behind me. I saw friendly soldiers in my peripheral vision as I entered the enemy's space. While I made my way through them, I cut down the attackers left and right. My goal was to get to their leader, who was in the center of the group. I couldn't say just how I knew he was the leader, but I had a hunch.

I went deeper and deeper into the fray while my comrades took care of the lesser enemies who were targeting me. I pressed further forward.

"You thought you could target House Anderson and get out of here alive?! How dare you!" I screamed angrily as I sliced through all the enemies I passed. The air felt ice-cold. While my enemies were left bewildered, I urged my horse to go faster.

And just like that, I killed their leader. I could feel the panic racing through the enemy group. "Your leader is dead!" I screamed as I killed yet another enemy near me. I called out to my comrades to kill every last one of the attackers who stood in their path, and they did as they followed after me.

Just as I expected, the enemy was now nothing more than a disorganized mob. It wouldn't be hard at all to clean up the stragglers. I heard the raw sound of tearing flesh as the nostalgic metallic smell of blood invaded my nostrils. The soldiers and I killed the enemies one by one until the circle around us dwindled.

There were now only enough enemies left to count on one hand.

"Eeek!" They screamed and looked up at me, trembling. It reminded me of a certain day, and I let out an inappropriate peal of laughter.

"You really had no resolve."

“Resolve this, resolve that... What the hell are you talking about?!” One of the remaining enemies screamed at me, trying to put on a brave front.

“The resolve to kill and the resolve to be killed,” I answered calmly.

Even my comrades were surprised to hear that.

“The resolve to be killed?” one of the soldiers asked.

“That doesn’t mean you have a death wish.” I replied with a small smile. “But nothing is certain when you go to battle. No matter how much you train or how much you hone your skills. When you lose, you lose. And when it’s your time to die, you’ll die.”

Father had told me that ever since I was a little girl. I had understood from a very young age that life is fragile.

“On the battlefield, there are no strong fighters. There are only people who will do whatever it takes to defeat the enemy...and those who can’t. That’s it.” I crouched down to be eye level with one of the enemies. “You all did not have that resolve. That’s why the second the tide turned in our favor, you collapsed like a house of cards. If you’d had that resolve, you wouldn’t have been afraid. You wouldn’t have tried to run to safety.”

“Mer... How were you able to gain that resolve?” Kreuz asked from above. His voice was serious and sounded a bit ominous in this atmosphere.

“I had that resolve from the very first time I picked up a sword.” My father made me vow that I had the resolve. At that time, I didn’t think about what would happen after I got my revenge. But my willingness to go down with the enemy in order to achieve it was something quite akin to a death wish. “But yes... My conviction is greater than my fear of death. So that’s how I continue to have resolve.”

I didn’t want anyone to experience what I had...and I didn’t care if I had to lose my life in order to make that happen. But at the same time, I had to survive for the sake of my loved ones, and that was why I feared death. While I feared death, I was also prepared for it. That contradiction was the resolve to die that I spoke of.

“I see.”

“I didn’t mean to talk so much. Anyway, someone, tie them up! I want the army to take them away! Guards, continue escorting Master Pax and deliver him safely to the march!” A bit of time had passed since the battle was over, but I still couldn’t switch gears, so I barked out orders. The army immediately sprang into action and obeyed. Now that I thought about it, it was quite surprising that they followed my orders during the battle. Out here, I was only known as the body double and bodyguard of the general’s daughter. And even if they had known I was *actually* the general’s daughter, I wasn’t in the army, so why should they follow my orders?

“Well, no matter...”

“Did you say something, Mer?”

“No, nothing. Take them away.”

After that, I ended up going back home to the march with my brother for the first time in a very long while.

Chapter 4:

The Future Duchess Looks Ahead

GAZELL TRAVELED with only a few guards on horseback. The same night that Pax left, a servant found the note Merellis had left, and the mansion erupted in panic. The servants apologized profusely for not having found the letter sooner, but Gazell couldn't blame them.

After all, Merellis usually didn't come back from her training until after sunset anyway. Plus, no one besides Nana knew that she was his daughter—they thought she was just a body double. None of the other servants would think it strange that she wasn't there.

He'd thought about immediately going to bring her back but decided against it. She was probably still on the move, so catching up to her would be difficult. Plus, she was with the guard and the army, so as long as nothing drastic happened, she'd be safe.

It was only after the battle that he received an urgent message that she had been traveling solo this whole time, and that was when he deeply regretted being so naive.

"I've been waiting for you, General." Kreuz was waiting for him at the border of the march.

"You did well." The first thing Gazell did once he walked into the guard tower was show his appreciation. The tower wasn't very large, so he arrived at the captain's office very quickly. "And the enemies?" Gazell got to the point as soon as they were alone.

"As I said in my message, they were mercenaries. They accepted the job because the pay was good. They said they were told to attack anyone looking to be of noble birth who crossed into the march."

Gazell heaved a deep sigh. "I see. And who hired them?"

Kreuz's face clouded over for a moment. "They say they don't know."

“They don’t know?” Gazell frowned. He wasn’t expecting that answer.

“That’s right. Apparently they signed a contract through a middleman instead of being hired directly. We’re looking into who that was, but right now, we don’t have any leads. We interrogated all the enemies who survived, and they all told us the same story.”

“Keep searching.”

“Yes, sir. Would you please tell me how you knew there was going to be an attack? Perhaps if we ask your source, it’ll be easier for us to find out who was behind it.”

“The Duke of Armelia.”

“Huh? The duke?” Kreuz repeated, sounding startled.

“Yes. I’ll ask him myself. I’ll share any useful information I come across.”

“Very well, sir. But how did the duke...?”

“He’s got eyes and ears everywhere. Don’t tell anyone else that he was the source.”

“Yes, sir.” After that, Gazell sat down in a chair, looking exhausted. He hadn’t slept or even rested since he left the castle, but who could blame him? As soon as they arrived here, the guards who had escorted him went straight to the bunk and were sleeping like logs.

“How was Mer?” Gazell asked casually, but Kreuz didn’t answer. The general found that suspicious and glanced over at him, only to see Kreuz trembling.

“She was ferocious.” Kreuz paused for a moment and then answered seriously.

“Oh?”

“I’m not only talking about her personal abilities but her keen judgment too—the way she immediately surveyed the battle and gave out orders. But most of all...her intensity was ferocious.”

Gazell had thought Kreuz was trembling from fear, but he was wrong. He was trembling from excitement.

“There was no reason for us to obey her orders, but before we knew it, we did everything she said. We didn’t care. I simply followed this little girl more than twenty years younger than me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.” His voice was getting more and more passionate. “She has the gift of being a leader, in a different way than you, to be sure—but she has it.”

“A different way than me, hm? What was different about it?”

“Your back is like a guidepost to us. We look at you and know we’ll be safe as long as we follow it. We take pride in following you. That’s why we don’t have any hesitation in doing so. If your back is like a guiding light, hers is like a raging hellfire. It stirred up our deepest instincts, forcing us to lay down any hesitation. That’s just how I personally felt, though.”

Fire. That was what Kreuz and the other soldiers felt when Merellis took command of the battle. She had spoken with a chilling voice and acted with such authority that it shook their hearts. She had stirred the embers inside of them into raging fires.

“I see.”

“Before, when you asked Verlys to teach Master Pax military strategy, I teased him and asked if you were planning on making the strongest band of warriors ever...but maybe I wasn’t too far off the mark.”

“I certainly wasn’t expecting to hear that from you. Well, no matter. Kreuz, I’m going to leave here and head for the march tomorrow morning. If you learn anything about who hired those mercenaries, send a messenger posthaste.”

“Yes, sir.” Kreuz answered. He bowed and then left the room.

Once the door closed, Gazell let out another deep sigh and then slowly closed his eyes. All the tension left his shoulders as he slowly sank back into the cushioned chair. He was exhausted from the lack of rest during the journey, and it didn’t take him long to fall fast asleep.

“I can’t believe you followed me! What a hopeless little sister I have. But I do thank you for saving me.” My brother said with a dry laugh a few days after we entered the march together. We just received word that Father had arrived,

and not long after that, I was summoned to see him. Even though I had prepared myself for it, I was terrified. I hesitantly stepped into his study.

“You idiot!!!” Just as I expected, he sent down the first jolt of lightning. “Do you have any idea how worried I was?! You must stop this selfishness!”

“I apologize for my actions and for worrying you, Father...” I obediently bowed my head and apologized. The very next moment, Father took me in his arms.

“I’m so glad you’re safe! And a job well done, protecting Pax!” His voice was trembling. The instant I heard that, a warm feeling rose up inside of me and tears streamed down my face.

“I’m so sorry!”

In the end, all that mattered was that my brother was safe. A few days later, we all began our journey back to the capital together.

“Settle down a little, Merry,” my brother said as I fidgeted in the carriage.

“But I haven’t worn a dress in ages. I just can’t sit still! My sword isn’t even within reach...”

I was returning to the capital as Merellis, so I was dressed in clothes befitting a young noblewoman and was riding in the carriage. I just wasn’t used to wearing a dress. My brother flashed me a dry smile.

“Father’s with us. There’s no reason to worry. Just enjoy the scenery. You weren’t able to the first time, right?”

“Okay...” I agreed, but getting used to this situation wasn’t that simple. I ended up being even more exhausted when we arrived than I was the last time.

The next morning, we ate breakfast and I quickly changed into my usual clothes I wore as Mer. The moment I put them on, I immediately felt like myself again. From now on, I’d have to lead a double life as Mer and Merellis. I would be Merellis all the time except for when I was training, where I could be Mer.

I was afraid Father would forbid me to continue my training after I disobeyed him, but I was surprised when he allowed me without any fuss at all.

I was so relieved as I headed to the sparring grounds.

“Mer!” I paused when I heard someone stop me and turned to see that it was Nana. “I was worried about you! What in the world would I do if anything ever happened to you? I could never face Lady Merellis or Master ever again!”

“I’m sorry I worried you, Nana. But I’m just fine.”

“Can’t you just take it easy for a while? You only just got home!”

“I know. But I rested a lot back in the march. I want to get back to training before I get out of practice.”

“I see... I know you’ll be fine and I shouldn’t worry, but please be careful. I’m going to go see how the mistress is doing.”

Nana was the only servant who knew my true identity, but she still had to be careful with her speech when we were in the mansion. Without her cooperation, I never would have been able to continue leading this double life. Even now when we were alone in a room together, she was pretending that I was Mer.

“Thank you. Please give the mistress my regards,” I said and then left to train.

It had been a while since I’d moved my body like this. Back at the march, Father told me that I was not allowed to train while we were there as punishment for my selfish actions and that I also had to ride in the carriage on the way back.

But now that I had the chance to work up a good sweat again, my mind felt clear.

“Long time no see, Mer.”

“Kreuz! Thank you so much for before,” I said, but he didn’t react. I gave him a puzzled look, and suddenly he burst out laughing.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about how you’re back to your usual self.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing.” He stifled his laughter. I still didn’t understand what he meant though and was totally baffled.

“Mer!”

“Long time no see. What happened after the battle? Did the general compliment you?” A group of other soldiers came up to talk to me.

“Hi, everyone. Thanks so much for your help the other day. Actually, he got very angry with me since I acted without permission... So I was under confinement for a while. As soon as it was lifted, I came back to the capital alone. I just got here.”

“Oh, so you didn’t travel with the general and his family?”

“No. But I don’t like to be away from my mistress for too long, so I came home as soon as I could.”

“Oh, okay. Have you seen Lady Merellis yet?”

“Yes, just for a few minutes, though.”

“Yeah, I only saw her from a distance, but she really does look a lot like you!”

“Yeah.”

My heart was pounding out of my chest from this conversation. *Of course she looks like me, because she is me!* But I could never say that. “I’m her body double, so I wouldn’t be a very good candidate for the job if I didn’t look like her,” I said, and everyone nodded in agreement.

“I guess that’s true. It’s kind of interesting that you two look so similar but have such different personalities.”

“Yeah. One is sickly and the daughter of a duke, and the other is the general’s prized student who can defeat grown men without batting an eyelash! You two are complete opposites!”

I had to admit that they were right, although the part about me being sickly was made up.

“Ha ha ha...” I joined in on the laughter. I couldn’t help that it sounded awkward.

“Oh, by the way, Mer. You free after we’re done training? Will you spar with me?”

“Sure, I’d love to.”

I definitely fit in here much better. This was how I was used to spending all my time, anyway. I really hoped that didn't have to change. After my training, I sparred with a few soldiers as promised. Working up a sweat was such a great feeling. It was like all the fatigue I'd felt in my heart was washing away.

"You're amazing, Mer."

"Where'd that come from all of a sudden?" I gave Kreuz a look as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I was just thinking about when you saved Master Pax. You become a completely different person when you hold a sword. Otherwise, you seem like an ordinary girl."

"Do I? I guess I've never thought about it before."

I did remember that I spoke quite abrasively on the battlefield, but that was a matter of life and death; they wouldn't see that side of me during normal training.

"I guess not. By the way, what's your new goal?" I didn't understand what he meant, so I gave him a puzzled look. "You know how you said before that you lost your goal of revenge, but you got a new one? And that's why you're honing your skills?"

"Ohh..." I murmured. "It's the same as everyone's goal."

"Huh?"

"My goal is to protect people, just like everyone else. I want to follow in the general's footsteps, just like everyone else. And if someone decides to follow me in doing so, and therefore protect more people as a result, then maybe it can save people in this kingdom from suffering like I did. I'm hoping to join the army."

"But you—" He started to say something but then stopped himself. "I see."

I wondered what he was going to say, but before I could ask him, I noticed a conflicted smile on his face. I decided not to press him.

Two months later, my father called me into his study. "Excuse me."

I entered the room and saw him, Kreuz, and Verlys inside. For some reason, there was a thick tension in the air.

“Ah, you’re here. Mer, I asked you here because there’s something I need to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Would you take part in a mission for the army?”

I was speechless for a moment—I wasn’t expecting that at all. “What do you mean?”

“A few weeks ago, there were several cases of daughters from noble or otherwise wealthy families being kidnapped right here in the capital.”

I opened my mouth to ask a question but then thought better of it. I could tell by the tone of his voice, and the mood in the room, that he was deadly serious.

“They’re slippery buggers and we can’t get any leads on the culprits. And because of who they’re targeting, we need to solve this case as soon as possible.”

“So you want me to pose as Lady Merellis and act as bait.”

“That’s right.”

“All right. Please fill me in on the details.”

“Are you sure? I know how strong you are, but this is a dangerous mission.”

“Powerless little girls are being kidnapped—that’s even more dangerous. I’m sure their parents are worried sick. But most of all, the more time that passes, the more danger they’re in. It’s important to find them as soon as possible. If I can use my power to help, then I won’t hesitate,” I declared firmly. Father let out a sigh.

“I see. Well, Verlys... I’ll leave the explanation to you.”

After that, Verlys explained the plan to me. I changed into Merellis’s clothes and climbed into a carriage, escorted by soldiers dressed up as bodyguards. There weren’t many people on the road in the noble neighborhoods this late in the day. I hoped that this would work on the first try. I gazed absently out at the

view outside. The town seemed a little sad and lonely without as many people walking around.

I felt strangely calm, despite being in the middle of an important mission. I laughed that I even had the presence of mind to be daydreaming like this. But of course, things rarely go as planned, so the day ended uneventfully.

The following week, we tried again. We randomly went to different neighborhoods where nobles lived, and sometimes I would walk in more deserted areas of the capital, but the enemy never showed. I had to wonder if the kidnapper was done. There were other teams trying to catch them too, but they weren't making any progress either. Even if they did come across the enemy, it would be hard to arrest them because our first priority was rescuing the kidnapped children alive. They didn't want to barge into the culprit's lair and risk the lives of children being held hostage.

The best scenario was for them to kidnap me so I would be able to protect the girls from the inside. As I pondered all of this, I heard a commotion break out all around. *Is this it?* I wondered as I glanced out the carriage window. I saw my guards engaged in a battle. It looked like the enemy finally took our bait.

My heart was pounding out of control, but my mind was incredibly clear. The door to the carriage opened with a click.

"Hello, Miss. Would you please come with me?" A man appeared. He was speaking politely, but he had a creepy smile on his face. He wasn't one of my guards, of course.

I backed up, pretending to be afraid. *I hope that was convincing enough*, I thought as I stared at him. I didn't resist so he grabbed me and pulled me outside. My guards were busy fighting with the other enemies. The man took me to a separate carriage that was waiting at the corner and pushed me inside.

I wasn't sure where we were going. I wanted to look outside, but he had blindfolded me. I could tell that there were several people inside the carriage, though. That was a bonus from the long time I spent training. I wasn't sure if the other soldiers who had been hiding and watching over the situation would be able to follow us, though. There was no way for me to know.

I trusted them, but I was also prepared to fight alone if need be.

Some time later, the carriage stopped. Someone grabbed my arm and forced me to walk. It seemed like we had to walk a long way from the carriage, so that meant we were in a large area. I wondered what kind of building we were in. I decided to concentrate on figuring out as much detail about the interior of the building as I could. Even though I was blindfolded and couldn't see, there was a staircase immediately after we entered. I noted that we then turned down several corridors. I heard a door open, and I was pushed into a room, where my blindfold was finally taken off.

It was an ordinary room, furnished and tidy. I thought that a kidnappers' headquarters would be a little dirtier or something, so it felt odd.

This seemed like a noble's mansion, although I didn't see any crests anywhere or expensive-looking furniture to prove it. However, the sheer possibility made me tremble. I looked around and saw a group of girls huddled in the corner. I quickly counted and there were five of them, the same number that Verlys said had been kidnapped.

"Are any of you hurt?" I asked as I looked them over. It might have been rude behavior otherwise, but none of them raised an objection.

"W-we're fine. Did they kidnap you too?" Most of the girls seemed to be too afraid to speak, but one of them answered me in a brave voice.

"Yes. I was out shopping and then they took me all of a sudden... Is that what happened to you?" They all nodded.

The girls must have been scared to death. Their pale cheeks were all stained with tears. One of the girls was still crying, and I could feel her fear. But most of all, I felt so sad to see her trembling and curled up in a ball that I put my arms around her and hugged her. "It's all right." I gently patted her back. "Someone will come save us soon. And I promise I'll protect you until then," I whispered and continued hugging her for a while. She gradually stopped trembling, and I felt her body begin to relax.

"Who are you? My name is Sharia. I'm the daughter of Count Telrose."

"I'm Merellis, the daughter of Marquis Anderson."

"What? You're General Gazell's daughter?!"

“Actually, I’m her body double and bodyguard, Mer. I’m working incognito to help solve the kidnappings. Right now, my job is to protect you all.” I could feel the relief in the air. Even though I was around the same age as the girls, they believed that I would be able to protect them. When people are in desperate times, they will cling to hope.

I myself wasn’t that kind of person, of course.

“Please forgive my rudeness, but I need you all to follow my orders. First, when the kidnappers come back, don’t make a sound and don’t move. Just stay here. It’s easier for me to protect you when you’re all in the same place. And I need you all to move over to that corner.” I stood up and pointed. Everyone slowly stood up and then hesitantly sat down in the place indicated. “If you’re scared, please close your eyes. I know it might be difficult, but please don’t scream.”

I took some lighter objects off a side table and used them to build a barricade.

“I’ll help,” said Sharia, who honestly looked so frail, even a spoon might’ve been heavy for her. But the two of us started moving furniture together, which made it a lot easier on me. It wouldn’t take long for the kidnappers to destroy our makeshift barricade, but it was better than not having one at all. Once we were done, I had Sharia go inside of it, and then I tore my long skirt up the sides to make it easier to move in. Then I retrieved a sword, which I had hidden inside my clothing. It was smaller and lighter than the one I usually used.

After that, I suddenly heard a commotion. It sounded like the second group of soldiers had followed me after all. I listened to the noise for a while. It seemed we were about to have a visitor.

The door burst open violently, and the man who kidnapped me appeared. He entered the room looking frantic but paused when he saw my sword.

“And what do you think you’re going to do with that, little lady?”

“I’m going to use it, obviously.”

“A little aristocrat like you? You should stop. Playing around with something like that’ll get you hurt.”

“Would you like to see if I’m just playing around?” I asked as I charged toward

the man.

He reflexively swung his own sword, but he was too late. I easily dodged his swing and then swept my blade upward, slicing right into him. He fell to the floor without a sound. *Is he dead?* I plunged my sword into his heart before I even checked. I couldn't afford any mistakes, and I wanted to make sure he didn't move again. After all, I was alone here with a bunch of girls who couldn't defend themselves. It was wise to reduce the risks as much as possible.



I lifted my sword and shook the crimson blood off the tip. I then moved to wait near the door. It didn't take long for two other men to show up. I could hear their footsteps drawing nearer. I killed the first one before he even made it through the door. And while the other one was in shock seeing his comrade's sudden death, I finished him off too. They both landed on the floor with a thud. I made sure they were both dead and then dragged the bodies next to the entrance. It would be hard for me to fight multiple people at once if they came in. This wasn't a very large room to begin with. If a group of attackers split up, it would be hard for me to respond to all of them in time.

But I *was* sure that they'd freeze when they saw the bodies piled up by the door, so I had to use that to my advantage. The commotion outside was growing louder. The soldiers were getting closer. I could feel more kidnappers nearing our room too. This time, it was another pair. I did the same thing as last time and killed the first one before he got in the room. The second one was about to swing his sword, but I crouched down and then used my momentum to leap backward. The tip of his sword grazed my clothes and ripped them.

The kidnapper looked dazed for a moment but then smiled. "I thought I got you, but you're pretty clever, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." I stared at him, a cold sweat running down my back. He was strong, much stronger than the other three, and I couldn't immediately see an opening in his technique for me to exploit.

He moved first. I silently cursed his swift, accurate swordsmanship but parried each strike.

Clang, clang, clang! The sound of our swords striking each other rang out in the room. I slightly shifted my center of gravity. The man predicted my next movement and swung his sword again. I dodged it and put distance between us. Having a strong enemy put me at a disadvantage, so why was I so thrilled about it? Why did I feel like it was fun when my life was endangered?

"Hey, why are you glaring at me like that?" The man muttered, but I didn't hear him.

Don't let an opportunity slip. Predict his movements.

The next moment, I closed in on him. He reacted to my movements and swung his sword upward. I dodged it, and he swung his sword even harder. I dodged it again, but he completely lost his balance. I wasn't going to let that opportunity slip. I took a step forward and swung my blade again. I felt a slight resistance, and then there was a crimson splatter. The man collapsed.

"Good thing there weren't two of you." *Because if there had been, it would've been hard for me to protect the girls.* I plunged my sword into his heart, killing him. I pulled it out, and he started bleeding even more.

It wasn't over yet, though. I quietly tried to listen for other enemies, and once again I heard footsteps approaching. They finally came inside, but I was relieved when I saw they were the familiar faces of soldiers.

"Sorry we took so long, Mer! You okay?!"

"Yes, I made it. Is the place secure now?"

"Yep. Thanks to you, we were able to fight without reserve. Thank you!"

"I'm glad to hear it. Can you help me move these things out of here?" I pointed to the barricade. For a moment the men seemed surprised but then chuckled and started helping me. I also asked some guards to move the bodies out of the room so the girls wouldn't see.

"Everyone! The army is here to save you! Are you all okay?" I said, stepping in front of the soldiers. I thought it was better if I stepped forward since I was the one who had told them everything.

Sharia looked like she was about to cry in response to my question—or actually, she looked like she was about to cry the moment she saw me. "We're fine because you protected us! Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." *So that's why...* I thought. I smiled knowing she had just been worried about me.

"Thank you so much for protecting us. We're all safe. We couldn't possibly thank you enough." She said as she walked over toward me.

"No, you'll get dirty!" I held up a hand, remembering I was covered in blood. But she shook her head and hugged me anyway.

“How can we ever thank you for doing that for us? Thank you so much!” she said.

For some reason I had tears in my eyes too.

“We should get going...” One of the soldiers piped up hesitantly. Sharia slowly stepped away from me. After that, the soldiers and I escorted all the girls home safe and sound.

“It’s been a while.”

I was looking out from the top of the tower when Louis showed up. My heart pounded seeing him again. I didn’t come to my favorite spot every day, but I did go there quite often when I was in the capital. However, it had been a few months since I saw Louis last. I felt like he’d grown taller since the last time I saw him.

“Louis!”

“Did something good happen?” He asked me suddenly, and I gave him a puzzled look. “Are you sure? Because it looks like it.”

“Is it that obvious?”

Louis smiled at me. I relented and then continued. “I saved a girl recently. I can’t tell you the details, but it really made me feel like everything I’ve done until now hasn’t been a waste. It was meaningful. And it really made me happy.”

I once walked through the darkness, but now I was on a different path. I think sometimes life is just like that. You never know what will happen, or what’s waiting for you, even right up to the point when it happens. You also can’t change what’s already happened.

That’s probably why people regret things and think that they should have done this or that. Everyone was walking through their own darkness, but there were little lights to guide them through, like dreams and aspirations. That was also what made me feel anxious sometimes. I wondered if I was going down the right path or if everything I’d done so far was worth it. It wasn’t a path I’d gone

down half-heartedly. It was one covered with blood, but I went down it anyway. Even if I was given a chance to do it all over again, I don't think I would choose differently.

Still, it was an amazing feeling to have validation from someone else, and to have saved them from the frightening feeling of grief. I felt that from the bottom of my heart. I think the reason I cried that day was because I was relieved as well.

"I see. Well, I'm happy for you."

"I'm happy too." I smiled back at him before looking back outside.

Louis stood next to me, admiring the view. Suddenly I glanced over and stared at him. He had a soft, relieved expression on his face. A poetic thought crossed my mind, and I wondered what the world looked like through those deep blue eyes of his. After I watched him for a while, I felt a little concerned. "Are you tired, Louis?"

"Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

"You just look pale," I said hesitantly.

For a moment, he was speechless, and then he sat on the ground. "Oh... Well, I guess I am. I haven't been sleeping well lately."

"What? So why are you here, then? Shouldn't you be sleeping? Go home and go to bed! You're going to get sick!" I replied frantically.

He chuckled. "I just feel like I never have enough time."

"What do you mean?"

"That's just how much work I have to do. It's probably mostly my imagination, because I'm trying so hard to follow in my father's footsteps. I want to make sure I am a good successor for him. But the more I chase after him, the more inadequate I feel compared to him," he said as he gazed absently out in the distance. "I'm just not enough. I don't have enough knowledge or experience or creativity. But most of all, I don't have enough talent. I feel like I have to study way more to fill in all those gaps."

I suddenly remembered back to when I wanted to beat Father so bad in a

sparring match. I had felt the same way. I was lacking *something*, and I kept searching for whatever it was to make up for it.

“If I don’t have enough talent, then I just need to keep learning in order to compensate for that. Time is limited. I need to do as much as I can before it’s time for me to succeed Father. And when I think of it that way, it just feels like there’s not enough time.”

“I know it might be hard for you to believe, but I understand how you feel. When I was first learning how to fight, I felt over and over again that I was lacking something and I had to make up for it. I was a girl learning how to use a sword, after all.”

He smiled a bit.

“But what’s driving you so much? Time is limited, of course, but there’s plenty of time before you and I become adults. Maybe I don’t understand, because I’m not going to be the one succeeding my father, but...”

“No, you’re right. The reason I’m panicking is just because I’m putting that pressure on myself. But I also need to be who I am. If I let myself break, I’ll get swept up in it and I won’t be able to give my full effort. Then I feel like I’ll never be good enough, and I’ll forever be hiding in Father’s shadow. And even when I was in a position to support the kingdom, I always thought, ‘Father would’ve done this better.’ I’m afraid of that. That’s the one thing I don’t want. I don’t want to have regrets, or wish I would’ve worked harder, or been more serious.”

I knew I’d never forget when he told me about his dreams up here in the tower that day. The memory was deeply rooted inside of me now. I wondered how much he’d struggled to get to this point and how many roadblocks had stood in his way. Maybe the shadow of his father was too great for him, even if his father didn’t mean for that to be the case.

“That’s your first battle.”

“You’re right.”

“But that’s exactly why you need to go home and sleep. You won’t be able to do any of that if you collapse from exhaustion.”

“Yeah, I know...” He trailed off and looked out in the distance. ““There are

some moments people want to go home to,” he said abstractly.

I gave him a puzzled look.

“My mom said that. For example, sitting around the table for family meals. Or spending time with your friends. The sunset you see on the way home when you’re done playing. Little everyday moments like that seem so much more special and heartwarming when you become an adult.” The setting sun had cast an orange glow over the city, and his soft voice drifted out over it and disappeared. I absently thought how beautiful and sad it was at the same time. “She said that moments like those accumulate and make you stronger when you become an adult. No matter how harsh you realize the world is once you grow up, you look back on those moments and remember that the world is beautiful. Basically, what she was trying to tell me was that I should make the most out of my childhood.”

“I think that’s lovely.”

“Me too.”

“But if you keep it up, you’re still gonna collapse and not be able to enjoy any of it.”

“I know, already!” he said with a dry laugh. “It just feels like sleeping is such a waste. I don’t want to blame it on what my mom said, but every time I get this busy, I think about those words. Because right now, this is the moment I want to go home to.”

“Ha ha. I think I understand.”

“Especially since I know that when I come here, I get to see you.” His words caught me off guard, and I could feel heat rising to my cheeks.

How cowardly, I thought. I hoped he blamed it on the color from the setting sun. “I’m honored,” I said, turning my gaze away and looking out over the city. “I want to go into town with you again. And do lots of things we can only do while we’re still children,” I said after my cheeks didn’t feel as hot anymore.

“Yeah,” he replied with a smile.

A few days later, I went to visit Madame in town alone again. I went before her restaurant opened so that the other ladies would be busy getting ready. I was sure they would never shut up once they learned what I was going to tell Madame, anyway.

Ever since the kidnapping incident, I was no longer under strict surveillance to make sure I didn't go out to town, so I just quietly went anyway.

"Hello, Madame."

I walked in and saw several ladies busy getting ready. Madame was intently focused on some kind of ledger book. "Oh, Mer! Welcome! It's been a long time since I saw you last." She looked up and smiled brightly at me. Her smile was so beautiful I couldn't help but give her one in return. "What brings you here today? Are you going to tell us another romantic story?"

"No. There's something I want to give you." I grinned and handed her a bottle of House Anderson's famous mead. I had bought it when I went home to the march with my brother. House Anderson was most well known for its armor and weapons because the march was rich in iron and steel, but I didn't have the budget to buy anything like that as a gift. Plus, what would Madame do with a shield or a sword anyway? That was why I bought the mead instead. I had also heard that it was quite popular with women.

"Oh my! Is this the famous Anderson mead? Thank you so much." She accepted it with a soft smile. "We'll all enjoy this bottle together."

"Please do so!" A grin spread across my face. I was so happy to hear she liked it.

Madame reached out and caressed my hair. "When did you go to the march?" she asked in a calm tone of voice.

"Recently, when the young master returned."

"Oh, I see, you went with one of the Andersons. You must've felt safe on the journey, then."

"No, I went there alone."

"Pardon?"

“Hm?”

Madame gave me a blank stare, which was quite unusual for her. I was puzzled.

“H-hang on a minute. You traveled all the way to the Anderson march by yourself?”

“Yes. I met up with the others on the last day, though.”

“On the last day...! That doesn’t change much. Why, that’s so dangerous! There are wild animals and bandits along that road!”

“Don’t worry, Madame. I’m strong enough to protect myself.”

Madame let out a deep sigh. “Well, I know you must be quite strong if they’ve recognized your talents. But you’re just a little girl, Mer!” She said and suddenly threw her arms around me. “I’m so glad you’re safe!”

Her concern made me smile.

“We are most definitely going to cherish this bottle of mead as we drink it together.”

“Hee hee. That makes me happy.”

“Madame! That’s not fair! Let us thank her too!” The ladies must’ve finished getting ready because they rushed over and all took turns hugging me and thanking me. I had a wonderful time chatting with them all, but before long, it was time for the shop to open.

“I’ll see you later, Madame. Excuse me.”

“Come again anytime, Mer.”

I was just leaving the establishment when I heard a familiar voice. “Hm? Why, it’s Mer!”

“Hey, it is! Fancy meeting you here, Mer!”

I turned and saw Kreuz and the other soldiers.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you all here. Where are you going?”

“Madame’s place, of course. Wait, isn’t that where...?”

Please don't finish that sentence, I gestured wildly for him to stop talking. But it was too late. They all put two and two together.

“Hey, that’s not fair, Mer! You beat us to the punch!”

And just as I expected, all the soldiers began raising a fuss. *Beat you to what?* I thought with a sigh.

“Mer’s our friend, so she gets special treatment.” Madame emerged from the shop with a charming smile on her face and hugged me from behind. That just riled up the soldiers even more. *Madame, why are you egging them on? Well, it’s too late now.* I had to let out a resigned laugh.

“Calm down, everyone. We’ll just have to beat her at her own game and show her how strong men can be!” Kreuz tried to smooth things over, and everyone went silent.

“Ugh...”

“Kreuz, I don’t think I can...”

“Beat Mer? I’d rather go hunting for a giant flesh-eating monster!”

Everyone immediately hung their heads in defeat. It was honestly adorable, really. Although I wondered what exactly they thought about me if they’d rather face off against a giant flesh-eating monster.

“Now, now, what a pathetic group of grown men!” Madame said bluntly, much to the men’s misfortune. It seems that we didn’t have the same opinion of what was adorable. I thought this would depress them even more, but for some reason I saw a renewed fighting spirit gleaming in their eyes.

“That’s right... We’re men! There’s no fight we’ll run away from!”

“Y-yeah! We can’t lose! I’m gonna win and prove that I’m a strong man! Lurulia! Will you go out on a date with me if I beat Mer?!”

“We can’t let Mer beat us forever! We’re men too, after all!”

“I think you mean ‘We’re men, after all’, not ‘We’re men too.’ I’m a *girl*, you know.” I muttered, but no one reacted. *Oh, well...* I thought with a sigh.

That competitive spirit continued to sparkle in their eyes as they looked my

way, but I felt like that was a good thing for me. “Well, if that’s how you feel, then I suppose we should settle this in the sparring ring next time!”

“Bring it on!” They shouted in unison. I had to smirk in response. I couldn’t wait for our next matches. My heart was racing with excitement as I thought about their renewed sense of enthusiasm.

“All right, all right. Calm down and go inside,” Kreuz said, clapping his hands. The sound of it seemed to cut right through the mood in the air. “You coming, Mer?”

“Can I?”

“Of course you can. You’re already here, aren’t ya? Come on and have fun with us.”

“Okay!” I happily accepted Kreuz’s invitation and followed.

“Oh, please. You’re just using poor Mer here as fodder to fire us up!”

“Anything to get you more enthusiastic for training.”

I was so excited I didn’t even hear that last exchange as I trotted into Madame’s establishment.

I looked around at the soldiers who were covered in just as much sweat as I was, but none of them were smiling. Today, the knights were here training with us, and there was an incredibly tense atmosphere in the air.

“I’m looking forward to training with you, General Gazell.”

“Mm, likewise.” One of the higher-ranking knights spoke on their behalf as they greeted my father. However, contrary to what the knight said, none of them looked particularly thrilled to be here training with the soldiers. The air was rife with tension.

The knights standing behind their representative were practically staring daggers at me. The soldiers might finally be used to me, but I’m sure the knights felt both uncomfortable and baffled to be sparring in the same place as a little girl.

Once the introductions were over, our training began. Practice swings came up first. Everyone quietly finished the exercises. Father would occasionally weave his way between us and offer corrections. Afterward, we started sparring matches like usual. We paired up, soldiers versus knights. I stood with the soldiers to wait my turn.

“Next! Mer and Donalti!”

I heard my name being called, along with another familiar name. I looked out toward the ring and there he was—the man who had beat me before.

Now things were getting interesting. My blood sang with excitement—the time had finally come to test myself and see how strong I had become.

“Please wait, General!” Donalti yelled for some reason, spoiling the mood.

“What is it, Donalti?”

“Why must I spar with a child? This is a waste of time for me!”

“You’re not satisfied with having Mer as your opponent?” My father’s voice lowered an octave. Donalti’s mouth closed shut—he was clearly intimidated... but the moment passed, and he got back his nerve.

“No, I’m not satisfied. She’s a commoner, and a girl! I don’t care how much you favor her. I have absolutely nothing to gain by sparring with someone so weak!”

“You heard what he said, Mer. What will you do?”

My heart felt surprisingly calm even after hearing that. I didn’t blame him. He’d beaten the pants off me last time, and I’m sure it wasn’t very satisfying for him. No matter what I said, it wouldn’t change that fact. There was nothing I could say to counter it. “I think words won’t be enough.” The only thing that would shut him up was showing him my true power.

My father smiled at my response. “You heard her, Donalti. How about this—you beat Mer and then you can spar with another opponent.”

“I’ll hold you to that, General.” Donalti looked dissatisfied but reluctantly agreed. He then sized me up with eyes full of scorn, and for some reason it made me laugh. The other knights around us were looking at me in the same

way. Some people might cry and run away if they were surrounded by hostile enemies like that, but instead I found it so enjoyable I could hardly stand it.

It was the same thing I'd felt when the soldiers had looked at me with that fighting spirit gleaming in their eyes. I was hungry for this feeling. It was like that tense exhilaration you get while walking on thin ice. It was a greedy feeling, wondering how you could make the enemy submit to you.

I smiled and picked up my sword, but that hunger disappeared immediately. When I held my weapon in my hands, everything else became unimportant. I pushed away any lingering feelings and thoughts and focused only on appraising my opponent.

My vision and mind were crystal clear as I concentrated on the battle.

The instructor called the match to start. I took a step forward and froze. I let my body sway like the leaves rustling on a tree branch in the wind. I needed to be ready to respond to anything my opponent did. The longer the painful silence carried on, the more in tune my body became with the match, and my feelings and thoughts sank deeper into my consciousness.

All I saw was Donalti in front of me. I handled his attacks deftly. He would swing his sword in all directions, sometimes trying to fake me out. I calmly dealt with all of it, waiting for an opportunity to arise. I don't know if it was because he wasn't taking me seriously or if he was always like this, but his movements were sloppy. They were fast and powerful, to be sure, and perhaps that was what had gotten him this far in the first place.

I analyzed his movements in the corner of my mind, and the moment I saw a chance to strike, I took it. Every time our swords collided, he was thrown off balance more and more. At long last, I knocked the sword out of his grip and jabbed the tip of mine toward his neck.

"The winner is...Mer!!" The instructor called out my name in a clear voice. All the knights looked stunned.

"There must be some kind of mistake!!! Yeah... I was just holding back! If I fight her again, I'll certainly win," he insisted. I heard sighs of relief from the knights, and it seemed like they agreed with him.

Conversely, the soldiers from the army were snickering at him.

“Hm, all right, then. Go ahead and fight her again.” My father’s voice was cold and intimidating. It was as if he were saying, *“Don’t think there’ll be a next time.”* Every person here knew that he was deadly serious, because that was one of my father’s teachings. Never assume there will be a next time, because in a battle, you either die or you’re victorious. Only a fool trains expecting there to be a next time. And never think that you can’t possibly win. Fear death. Fear death but also prepare for it to belong to you. My father had drilled all of this into our heads.

But apparently Donalti didn’t know that. He picked up his sword and triumphantly readied it. Meanwhile, I sharpened my senses once more, so I was ready to spring into action at the instructor’s signal.

“Begin!” His voice rang out, and I was the first to move. It felt like my entire body subconsciously jolted to take advantage of his carelessness and attack him in his unguarded moments.

“What...?” Donalti said, dumbfounded. It felt like his voice was very far away.

But it didn’t matter. It didn’t even register to me. It was like my consciousness had a thick wall built up around itself to separate it from the outside world. All I had to do was focus on analyzing my opponent’s movements.

While I had him off guard, I swung my sword upward and knocked his out of his hands. I then swung my sword back down, placing it against his neck. It felt like it was meant to be there, like this outcome was predetermined. The match had lasted mere seconds, and everyone watching was absolutely stunned.

“...The winner is Mer!” The instructor said after a pause, his voice severe. It snapped everyone back to reality. The sounds of the world came rushing back to me. I heard the cheers of the soldiers and the complete bafflement of the knights. It was difficult to separate out one group from the other because they all came at me at once, washing over me like a huge wave.

Personally, it didn’t make much of an impression to me, that I had just beaten the person I never wanted to lose to again, who I had vowed to beat the next time we faced off.

Instead, I mentally reviewed the match and critiqued my actions, thinking, *I should have done this instead, or that wasn't a bad move.*

"Again...!" Donalti finally snapped back to reality himself and yelled, climbing to his feet. The sound of his voice interrupted my train of thought. Cheers of agreement went out through the group of knights, and the soldiers all started to object. I could tell this was an explosive situation.

My father's voice rang out, interrupting Donalti. "Asking for another chance isn't something you should do lightly. Would you do the same thing on the battlefield, on the verge of life and death?" My father asked calmly, and Donalti was speechless for a moment.

"Well..."

"You're full of yourself. You think you're so strong. But on the battlefield, there are no strong warriors; the only strong warriors are the ones who win, and the ones who survive." The crowd went silent. "Training isn't training when you get used to letting your guard down. That carelessness puts your comrades in danger too. People's bodies are fragile. Accidents can happen, even during practice, so you shouldn't come into it with such a lighthearted attitude that you think there's gonna be a next time. Because that right there is how accidents happen." As my father spoke, Donalti turned his face downward. "I'll say it again. Asking for another chance isn't something you should do lightly. No matter how many times you spar with her, you won't win. Go cool off your head," my father finished sharply. Donalti didn't say another word.

Cheers and words of agreement went up from the soldiers, and the knights all objected. I thought my father would be irritated by the hostile atmosphere, and he certainly was angry. He yelled out, his voice dripping with malice. "I'm not just talking to Donalti! I'm talking to all of you!"

Every single person went silent.

"Why the hell are you training? Don't underestimate others! Don't be satisfied, either! Be hungry! Be humble! If you forget those things, then you're nothing more than one of those bandits on the street! It doesn't matter who your family is or where you came from. You're learning how to kill people. And that means you must be more disciplined than anyone else. You have to

continue honing your skills. Going out on the battlefield without the respect of others and without anyone relying on you is the same thing as fighting alone! Don't forget that every single person here has an equal chance of dying out on the battlefield! And if you still wish to go down this path, then don't rely on words! Prove yourself with your actions! That's all I have to say. Carry on."

My father's words struck down like lightning bolts from the heavens. No one moved a muscle. They all just stared at him, completely stunned. Finally, the instructor hesitantly called the next match, and training resumed. The mood in the air was even more tense than before. Everyone's fighting spirits were roiling, and knights and soldiers alike wore serious looks on their faces.

Once it was over, I picked up my practice sword and walked over to the water fountain so I could wet a cloth and wipe my face down. Unfortunately, I ran into three lower-ranking knights on the way there, Donalti being one of them. Even though there weren't many of them, that still didn't change the fact that I had a bad feeling about this, especially since he was there. I had a hunch that there was going to be trouble, so I tried to turn around.

"It's all your fault...!" A trembling voice, dripping with hatred, was directed at me. Since I had just heard that same voice earlier today, there was no way I could've forgotten it. I knew exactly who of the three it belonged to.

"Hey." One of the others tried to dissuade him, but there was no stopping him now.

"It's all your fault! My reputation is completely ruined!"

I felt his hostile, violent aura and I knew I was in danger, so I made sure I could pull out my sword at any time. He was trying to get at me, but the other two were holding him back.

"Knock it off, Donalti!"

"Let me go!" He glared at me, only getting angrier because he couldn't get to me.

"Don't blame me. This is a result of you underestimating me during our matches. It's just like the general said. You weren't putting your all into training, and it came back to bite you in the end." As I spoke, I realized that was why I

couldn't be genuinely happy that I'd beaten him. Once, I was excited to fight him. I hadn't intended on losing, but I'd learned from my match with him. But today, I didn't feel a thing. Perhaps since time had passed, my memory of him painted him out to be stronger than he really was. Maybe what had excited me back then was that he moved like someone who wasn't serious about his training.

And at the same time, I thought it was a shame. I had expected that he'd gotten stronger.

"...!" He flailed around when he heard what I said. The other two frantically tried to hold him back at this point. "You're nothing but a girl! What's the point of you training at all?!" He continued screaming at me. I realized my words had only added fuel to the fire, but honestly, that was his own fault. "It's just playtime to you! You're nothing but an eyesore!"

"It's not playtime to me. Once my job as bodyguard and body double is finished, I'm going to join the army and use my talents to protect everyone. I would never train with anything less than a serious attitude," I replied, but for some reason Donalti started laughing. It was sadistic and filled with so much derision it was making me angry. I was so uncomfortable that I started walking again.

"Ha ha ha. That's the funniest thing I've ever heard! You think you're gonna join the army?! Women aren't even allowed in the army! What the hell are you dreaming about?!" He spat, and I stopped in my tracks.

Not allowed to join the army? What in the world was he talking about?

"You're wasting your time on something that'll never happen! And it's all your fault that my reputation is ruined! You've gotta be kidding me! You're just an eyesore! Don't you dare ever step foot in General Gazell's training area again!" He screamed at me as the two knights dragged him away.

I stood there in shock watching them leave. What did he just say? *He's lying. It's a lie. He's lying!* Kreuz knew about my dream and was encouraging me! Surely, Donalti was just saying that to provoke me! It couldn't be true...but if it *was*, why was I continuing to train? I tried to come up with an answer, but I couldn't get my doubts out of my head. I ran around, searching for Kreuz in

order to clear things up.

“Hey, Mer. What’s wrong? Why are you in such a hurry?”

I finally found Kreuz in the corner of the sparring grounds.

“Oof!” And as soon as I did, I pounced on him. “Wh-what’s going on? What’s got you so worked—”

“It’s a lie, isn’t it?!” I screamed, interrupting him. “It’s a lie that women can’t join the army, right? You encouraged my dream, didn’t you?!” The easygoing look on his face had vanished, replaced with a very painful look.

“I’m sorry.” He apologized, and I immediately knew. Donalti was telling the truth.

“Why?!”

“You sacrificed everything for your revenge, but then you finally became positive and hopeful. I didn’t have the heart to tell you it would never happen. I just wanted you to look toward the future again. I knew I should have told you the truth sooner, but I was afraid. I couldn’t do it.”

No! That’s not what I want to hear!

“Why? Why can’t a woman join the army?!”

He didn’t answer me. *Or maybe there is no answer.* I looked at the sorrowful, remorseful look on his face, but I didn’t have the presence of mind to accept it right now.

“Ah, Mer!” I heard him yell after me as I ran toward the town.

I could barely see in front of me through my tears, but I knew this road like the back of my hand so it was all right. I ran and ran and ran. I finally arrived at a familiar spot—the tower. Now that I thought about it, I always seemed to come here when I was going through a rough time. It was the first place I thought of when faced with something painful. I ran up the stairs toward the top, where you could look out over the whole city. As soon as I got there, I looked for him.

But he—Louis—wasn’t there.

Of course he wouldn't be here just by coincidence. I was about to slump right onto the ground, but...

"Oh, hi, Merry. It's been a while since I saw you last."

I whirled around.

"Louis..."

He was surprised when he saw my face.

"What's wrong, Merry?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. I staggered over, threw my arms around him, and started to sob. He didn't ask me anything else. He just quietly held me while I cried. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but I cried and cried until I just couldn't cry anymore. My tears seemed to have washed away all the dark feelings inside of me, all the anger and the pain, and I felt surprisingly calm.

But now my heart was racing for a different reason. I'd given into my emotions and hugged him. Now I was feeling bashful and couldn't even look at him.



“Do you feel better now?” He asked calmly, which only made me more embarrassed.

“I-I’m sorry, I...!”

“Don’t worry about it. Are you okay?”

“Y-yes... I feel much better after crying it out.” I hastily replied, and he gently patted my back.

“Just rest easy now. Can I ask what happened?”

“Well...” I trailed off, and he gave me a half smile.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“I know...”

After that, I told Louis everything about how I’d wanted to join the army but just found out that it was impossible. Sometimes I got emotional, and I’m sure I wasn’t making much sense. My words were probably hard to follow, but he quietly listened to me the entire time.

“You’re so dedicated,” he said, after I had finally gotten it all out.

“Dedicated?”

“Yeah. Once you decide on a path, you don’t look back. I really admire your hard work and dedication.”

“Thanks...” I wasn’t expecting him to compliment me, so it left me speechless.

“That’s just my opinion. Sorry to derail the conversation. So you can’t join the army... If you give up on everything just because of something that jerk said, then maybe you didn’t want it very much in the first place.”

His words hurt, and I reflexively glared at him. He chuckled wryly and said, “You have so many options ahead of you.”

“You mean I should just give up on it?”

“That’s not what I mean. I think maybe you should change your perspective. For example, did you always want to join the army? Why were you honing your skills? Were you after the honor of joining the army, or was it to protect the

citizens?”

“Well...” I looked down, thinking it over.

“That’s where you need to start. Have an open mind. Isn’t this a good time to reevaluate yourself and think about your opportunities? Was the army your goal or the means to an end?”

Honestly, I couldn’t even answer that.

“If it’s the former, then cry as much as you like. If it’s the latter, is there any reason for you to cry? If it was just a means to an end, then think about another way you can get to your goal. You might come up with a different way to approach it.”

“This is complicated.”

“All right, let’s see... If wanting to join the army was just a means to an end, you can still use the skills you’ve gained with your sword toward your goal, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is the army the only way you can use your skills with the sword? It’s not, right? You could get a recommendation to join the knights or become a mercenary.”

“That’s true...”

“That’s just an example, though. You can think it all through step by step. First, focus on your goal and then try to think about how you can achieve it. Consider all the possibilities. And if you still think the only way to do it is by joining the army...”

“Yes?”

“Then you need to shift your thinking to try to figure out how you can join.”

“But it’s not allowed.”

“It’s true that there hasn’t ever been a woman to join the army. But why isn’t it allowed?”

“Well... Well...”

I didn't have an answer, and he laughed. "See? You don't know, right? So you need to find out why, and then keep asking questions. And then all you have to do is get them to recognize your talents, and you could be the first female soldier the kingdom's army has ever had!"

It suddenly felt like the veil covering my eyes was lifted. He was right, and I had to laugh. Why weren't women allowed in the army? I had no idea! Was it because they were weak? Was there simply a law against it? I didn't know why, so that's why I couldn't accept it. It had felt like I was being rejected.

"You're right. I'll think about why I wanted to join the army in the first place. And if I think and think and realize that it's definitely what I want, then I'll kick and claw and fight for it. If I want something that bad, I know I'll do anything to get it."

Louis smiled brightly at me, his gaze softening.

"Hey there, Gazell."

"Long time no see, Romello."

Gazell was just wondering why he hadn't seen Romello for a while when the man suddenly showed up at the Anderson mansion. He had a casual attitude about him as if he'd just strolled up yesterday, and Gazell thought once again how very different he was from most nobles. But then again, Romello's attitude made it more comfortable for him. Still, he had to let out a small chuckle.

It had been a very long time since he'd been to the Anderson house during the day. For him to show up at this exact moment made him wonder if Romello knew what was going on or if he was just predicting his actions. Gazell wondered if there was something behind the man's lighthearted tone, but then again, he knew Romello's actions were always quite intentional.

"Perfect timing. I have something to talk to you about," Gazell said as Romello sat down.

"It's about the kidnapping incident and the attack on Pax, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Just as I thought, though Gazell didn't say it out loud. There was no point, after all.

"I'm sorry about the incident with Pax. I was aware of the mercenaries, and we'd already arrested the bolder ones. I had no grounds to arrest the others since they hadn't been witnessed committing any crimes yet."

"That's fine. Since I got the info from you beforehand, we were able to avoid any real danger. And I know what you mean, but that's not what I'm trying to ask."

"You want to know about the background of both incidents?"

"Yes. The information I have is so vague that I have a bad feeling about it. Something's fishy about the whole thing. Call it a hunch."

"Your hunches are like a wild animal's instincts," Romello said, genuinely sounding as if he were praising Gazell. "But they're good instincts. You're right. The same people are behind both incidents."

"What's going on in this kingdom?"

"It's not about the kingdom. The incidents are centering around House Anderson. In other words, they're focused on *you*."

"What are you trying to say?" Gazell seemed stunned by Romello's comment.

"The victims of the kidnappings were all girls around the same age as your daughter, right? And they all happened since she came to the capital."

"Someone's targeting her?"

"Ultimately, yes. The only reason they targeted other girls around her same age first was to cover their tracks." Romello said with a sarcastic laugh.

"Who is it, then? Who's pulling the strings?"

"Well... Count Luhmer has been arrested. You were the one who caught him, after all. And that solved the kidnapping incidents, right?"

"You know Luhmer. There's no way he could've come up with that plot on his own," Gazell protested.

Romello didn't object. He remained silent. So Gazell took that as a yes.

“Before I answer you, can I finish what I came here for?” Romello suddenly changed the subject after a heavy silence. “I’ll definitely answer your question, but I want to know something else first.”

“Fine, fine. What brings you here today, then? Sorry I didn’t mention it earlier, but you look exhausted.”

“I thought you wouldn’t notice, but I am pretty exhausted. It’s unusual that you’re still at the mansion at this time of day too. What are you doing?”

“I just had to attend to some business regarding the march. Normally, I let others take care of it, but I wanted to do this one myself.”

“My, my. Sounds like it’s busy work, being a general. You can’t neglect your march, you know! Especially when it’s got such rich resources. You need to make sure you watch that very carefully.” House Anderson had built its reputation based on its military prowess, and the related march was a mountainous region that was full of mines. It was well known for its iron and steel.

The iron ore mined from the march was smelted and then made into weapons and armor. Compared to other domains, more people from the march had learned the military arts than normal, but the environment was one of the main factors.

“I never intended on becoming a marquis, you know. I don’t know a thing about running a business.”

“Your instincts are reserved only for war, eh? Tch. Good thing I came here, then. I think you trust me, don’t you, Gazell?”

“Where’d that come from all of a sudden? I can’t believe you could keep a straight face asking me something so embarrassing.”

“Just listen to me. I came here first before I had someone else investigate it. Can I see your books for the mines?” Romello asked.

If anyone else had asked, Gazell would’ve immediately said no. That was basically asking him to show his finances. However, this was the kingdom’s prime minister.

“Fine. Here.” Gazell gave Romello the books without any hesitation, to the other man’s surprise. “I figure if you’re asking, it must be important. I trust you. Not because you’re the prime minister, but because you’re *you*. I’m not good at strategy or things like that, but maybe if you look at it, you can figure it out.”

“Heh. All right, then.” Romello answered brusquely to hide his shyness. He took the ledger and started reading through it. He was much faster at it than Gazell. He flipped through the pages quickly, analyzing them.

“Hey, Gazell... When’s the last time you went to see the mines yourself?”

“Maybe a month ago? I had business in the march.”

“And before that?”

“I don’t know. I do go regularly, though.”

“Was anything different about the mines compared to the last time you were there?”

“I didn’t notice anything.”

“That makes sense. Ahh, I knew I had a bad feeling about this.”

“What is it?”

“Someone’s making off with your ore.”

“How can you tell?”

“It’s hard to pinpoint it, but... There’s been a sudden increase in costs to the march. When you compare the price each company is selling them at and take the workers’ wages into account, something just doesn’t add up. I think you need to start taking a closer look at the blacksmiths. Have the commerce guild start looking into this immediately.”

“Who would do this? And why?”

“The same person who’s behind the other two incidents! Whoever’s after you.”

“C’mon, Romello. Won’t you just tell me already who’s behind it all?” Gazell glared at his friend.

“Yeah, I’ll tell you. Once you check into the blacksmiths.”

“Why?!”

“It’s for your own good.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“At first, I thought I should just tell you and get it over with. But honestly, I was a bit worried that maybe you were in on it.”

Gazell slammed Romello against the wall with a thud. “Are you saying you thought I might have caused Merelda’s death?!”

“That’s right.” Romello admitted, his face twisting with pain.

“You bastard!” Gazell glared at him and bit his lip as he tightened his grip on Romello’s collar.

“Remember what I said...? There are many nobles in this kingdom who are hiding things under that thick skin of theirs! They make a big show of loving someone, but underneath it, they’re just using them.”

“Don’t you dare say another word about my love for Merelda!”

“I get it! I’m saying you’re not like that!” Romello shouted, which made Gazell loosen his grip slightly. “I’ve been with you long enough to understand that, so I realized that couldn’t be the case right away. Just as you trust me, I trust you.”

“Then tell me! Who caused Merelda’s death?!” It was a painful scream. Romello had never seen him like this before.

“Don’t you understand?! It’s someone so close to you that I thought maybe you were in on it! After I knew I could trust you, I still couldn’t even bear to tell you! It’s someone very precious, very important to you! A person who could divert the ore to somewhere else!”

“No...” Gazell murmured in shock in response to Romello’s screams. All the tension left the general’s body as he finally released his friend. Romello slumped to the floor right on the spot.

“I don’t have to say another word. It’s exactly who you’re thinking.” Romello said.

Gazell began to unsteadily pace around the room before sitting down in his

chair. He then leaned over and held his head in his hands. It pained Romello to see him like this.

A heavy silence fell over the room, and neither man said a word. The truth was too much for Gazell to bear, and he began to tremble. "I want to hear it from your mouth. I'll believe it if I hear you say it." he finally said, breaking the silence.

Romello let out a heavy sigh. "The person who sent the bandits to kill your beloved wife, the person who organized the attack on your daughter and son, and the person who is diverting the ores and trying to cause a rebellion...is your younger brother."

Gazell wept at the revelation.

Interlude

“SHALL WE TAKE a little break?” Mother said, snapping me back to reality. I was enraptured by her story, and no wonder! They always say that sometimes truth can be stranger than fiction. I couldn’t believe the woman called the Flower of High Society had thrown herself into that harsh training so much when she was a little girl! I’d never trained at all myself, so honestly I wasn’t sure how harsh it was. But it was clear that the path she had followed was not an easy one, especially since her skills surpassed Lyle and Dida. She was so powerful that she had the complete admiration of the Anderson guard. The reason she was so powerful today was because of everything she’d worked for back then.

That was why it was so easy for me to accept it as truth.

Still...

“So you were head over heels for Father even when you were children.”

“Oh, goodness, Iris! That’s embarrassing.” Even I thought she looked adorable as she blushed. It was quite the contrast between the picture she had painted of herself in her stories. “Time has nothing to do with it. After all, you fell in love quite hard and fast too, Iris!”

I couldn’t argue because I’d experienced it myself. I had fallen in love with Dean quite quickly. At the time, I gave up on him due to our different social statuses, and I had also told myself that I would never fall in love again. I did my best to convince myself that I wasn’t falling in love.

But the more I resisted, the deeper I fell.

“You’re right,” I agreed, after a pause. Thinking of that time in my life now was so nostalgic. I let out a little giggle at the memory. Since her story had been so heavy, the peaceful mood in the air now made me let out a little sigh. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Pardon me. The marchioness of Anderson is here.”

“Oh, that’s right! She sent me a letter saying she was going to drop by. Go ahead and let her in.”

“Shall I leave you to her, Mother?”

“Not at all! It’s been a while since you two saw each other. I’m sure she’s eager to catch up.”

A few moments later, my aunt—the marchioness—entered the room.

“It’s been so long, Merry, Iris.” My aunt said in a pleasant voice, taking a seat next to Mother.

“So long? Why, we just saw each other the other day!”

“Did you hear that, Iris? Merry’s so cold to me.”

“What in heaven’s name are you talking about? Not even a week has passed since you were here last!”

“Yes, a whole week!”

As I listened to their friendly banter, I thought about how close the two of them were. But at the same time, my mind wandered back to Mother’s story. Hearing it once just wasn’t enough. “Ah!” I exclaimed as I realized something.

“Wh-what is it, Iris?” Both my mother and aunt looked concerned when I yelled all of a sudden.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Auntie, didn’t you say once that your first love was Mother? She rescued you, and she was like a prince.”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, goodness! You told Iris about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Weren’t you telling her stories about the past too?” My aunt giggled when she saw how embarrassed my mother was.

“So that means that the little girl you rescued in town—that was Auntie?”

“That’s right! That day, I was out shopping with my mother. I got curious and started walking around on my own, and we were separated. I got lost and ended up in a back alleyway, where some suspicious men began to follow me. Merry saved me from them! Of course, I never would’ve guessed someone that

strong was a little girl! When I saw her with your grandfather, I figured she must be from a noble family, but I certainly wasn't expecting her to be his daughter!"

"When we met again formally, I remember that I panicked! You yelled, 'Why are you wearing a dress?!'"

"Ha ha! I'm so sorry about that. I had no idea the prince I was searching for would be at my engagement party! Oh, but don't get the wrong idea, Iris. I married Pax because I fell in love with him!"

I knew that as well. Their relationship was famous because it was unusual for members of House Anderson to marry for love. And despite receiving many offers of marriage because of his status as the kingdom's hero, my grandfather married my grandmother Merelda even though she was just barely a noble. She was only the daughter of a baron.

Since my uncle Pax was the son of a hero, he had also received many offers for marriage, but Grandfather rejected them all and told Uncle Pax to find his own way. That story was particularly famous as well. Rudy had told me that every time Uncle Pax went to a party, daughters of noble families fought each other to see who could get the most of his attention.

Everyone thought Mother married Father for political reasons, but anyone close to them knew they had married for love. Honestly, after hearing her story, I had to wonder why anyone would think so! The two had known each other since they were children.

"What attracted you to Uncle Pax, Auntie?"

"Hm... I think it's because he's so strong." She answered me a bit shyly, but she had a happy smile on her face.

"His strength?"

"Yes. My first love was my first love, but it seems that in general, I'm attracted to strong men. Actually, at first, Pax was completely out of the running."

"Really? But I thought Grandfather trained him too?"

"Pax didn't ever really show that to the public." I gave Mother a puzzled look after she answered.

My aunt laughed. “Ha ha ha... Pax never took any classes related to swordsmanship. He was teased about it quite often. No one could believe that the successor of House Anderson wasn’t properly trained in the way of the sword. The ones who were especially cruel about it were the men trying to become knights, or at least the ones who were incredibly fond of Gazell. Pax was never fazed, though. He never said anything, it just made the backlash greater.”

“Ahh, I see...”

“Since he never addressed it, I felt sorry for him and told them all off.”

“How dare you speak like that to someone from the Anderson family! In fact, how dare you disparage *anyone* like that?” I couldn’t stand hearing the insults anymore, so I gave them a piece of my mind just as Master Pax happened to walk by.

Honestly, it made me just sick hearing them call the future marquis of Anderson a coward! I just couldn’t help myself from speaking up. I had a bad habit of poking my nose in where it didn’t belong, but... These men were all from dukes’ families, and I’d heard rumors they had aspirations of knighthood. I knew I shouldn’t be facing off against people like that, but I couldn’t fight back the urge.

I glared at them, and much to my surprise, they left. I breathed a sigh of relief and then turned toward the next problem—Master Pax had overheard me. “It would be nice if you could speak up for yourself for a change! Doesn’t it bother you when they drag your family and Master Gazell’s names through the mud?”

Master Pax stared at me, astonished. Then he burst out laughing.

“I-I’m serious!”

“You’re quite the brave girl, aren’t you? I couldn’t believe it when I saw you lecturing men twice your size! Ah, pardon me. I’ll take it into account.”

“So then...”

“But honestly, it’s not necessary. Nothing they say bothers me. If my father

were here to see it, he'd just laugh."

"I see..."

"There's no need to get so upset about it, but thank you for trying to help me." He addressed me warmly and then hurried into the classroom. I came back to my senses and glanced at the clock—it was time for my next class as well. I practically ran down the hallway to make it in time.

After I was done with my classes for the day, I left the building and headed for my dorm. I saw some boys practicing with their swords in the sparring area. Perhaps they were trying to improve their skills, or maybe they just wanted to get some exercise. I stared at them absently when suddenly I noticed that Master Pax was walking next to me.

"Hey, isn't that..."

"Well, if it isn't the shame of House Anderson. I heard a girl had to protect him earlier."

I turned toward the voices and saw the two boys I'd scolded earlier, along with the son of a marquis.

"That girl is so irritating. Not only did she scold us, but she glared at us! I prefer more feminine girls."

"I agree. Did you know she *still* isn't engaged?" The son of a marquis snickered while another boy, the son of a count, agreed with him. They were talking even louder than last time, so I could hear it all the way over where I was. I was certain they were doing it on purpose so I'd hear, and that made my body tremble with anger.

"How dare someone who wants to become a knight say such things..." Pax said.

I was so upset, but I couldn't find the right words to say. I had tears in my eyes, and I thought I'd cry at any moment.

They glared at him. "What did you just say?"

"Can't you hear? I said, 'How dare someone who wants to become a knight

say such things?”

“Excuse me, but what do you know about the knights? You’re just some spoiled brat who brings shame to your family’s name!”

“Say whatever you want, but I’ve been around knights my whole life, and I’ve never heard any of them talk like that. And how dare you talk to a lady that way? You’re the ones who are bringing shame onto your own families.”

“Hmph! Once you become a knight all you have to do is protect people! We’re too busy with our rigorous training to care about that.”

“That’s pretty harsh.”

“I don’t think you’d understand.”

“How about we spar, then?” Master Pax suggested, entering the ring.

The boys scowled back. “Sure. We’ll spar with you.”

“In that case, I’ll teach you how a real noble is supposed to act. And after we’re done, you’re going to apologize to this lady.”

“Sure, we’ll make sure we do it right in front of you. But it’s meaningless unless we have witnesses, right? This is all assuming you’ve even made it through a training session.”

“And what if *you* don’t make it?”

“Impossible! You should worry about yourself first.”

I couldn’t help but call out to him. “Master Pax!”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to protect your honor,” he said warmly as he turned around.

“But your safety is more important!” I yelled.

For a moment, he looked shocked, but then he smiled. “I’m going to be fine, really.” He picked up a sword and faced off with those boys, one by one.

One of the witnesses called the match to order. I prayed as I watched over it, but the match only lasted seconds. I heard a sharp clanging noise and then saw his opponent lying on the ground. It all happened so fast that my breath caught in my throat.

“You went too far!” one of the boys yelled as he helped the other one to his feet.

“Too far? I thought you were going to spar with me. You said you all train so rigorously, after all.” Master Pax replied with a smile. “I’m surprised that despite going through that, you’ve forgotten the knights’ code. That’s some nerve, running your mouth when you lost to the shame of House Anderson,” he continued. That only made his opponents tremble and grow red with anger. “Now get up. You’re going to apologize to the lady.” He grabbed the boy by his collar and dragged him over to me. “How long are you going to sleep? Wake up!”

“U-um, are you sure you’re not going too far?” The witness had visibly paled.

“Too far? If they go through such harsh training, a match like this should be a piece of cake. More importantly, it’s not over yet. Not until he apologizes to the lady.”

“O-okay...” The witness didn’t look convinced but didn’t say anything else, either.

“That’s enough, Master Pax. Thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I feel much better after watching you slam this boy to the ground.”

“All right, then.” He shoved the boy away and then left as though nothing had happened.

“Um, Master Pax? If you’re that strong, why haven’t you said anything about it until now?”

“What would boasting about my own strength accomplish?” he asked me in response.

I wasn’t expecting that and wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“It might be necessary sometimes as a deterrent, but there’s really no reason to brag about how strong one is here at the academy, right? I believe that strength should only be used when absolutely necessary. If you use it every day, it’ll come back to bite you. Plus, if you’re powerful enough, people will know

just by looking at you. You don't have to prove it. Also..." He then laughed. "I'm not that strong. I know someone much stronger. I wouldn't dare boast about my strength."

I'd never even touched a weapon before in my life, but watching Master Pax knock a boy out in a second showed me that he was definitely quite strong. I had to wonder who in the world could be stronger than him! I figured he must be talking about Master Gazell.

"It was worth it this time because I defended your honor. But I'm not going to go out of my way to pick up a sword here at the academy."

"I'm sorry that I made you do that."

"It's all right. I just told you, it was worth defending your honor," he said with a little smile.

"Oh my, Uncle was so dashing!" I exclaimed after I heard my aunt's story.

"Wasn't he? That's when I started falling in love with him. It wasn't long before we became a couple, and then we got married."

"That's such a lovely story."

"Yes, I treasure those memories... But then at our engagement party, I saw my first love there wearing a dress! I was so shocked."

"I was the one who was shocked. My father, brother, and I were all stunned when you yelled out like that!" The two of them burst out laughing at the memory.

"The experience of those men chasing me was so terrifying that I tried not to think about it again. I wanted to make my prince who saved me proud of me. I think that's how I'm here today. They're not all good memories, but they made me into the person I am today."

I really understood how my aunt felt. It seemed like an eternity ago now, but I remembered when I was suddenly plunged into the world of my game and experienced my engagement being broken in public. It wasn't a good memory, but it made me into the person I was now. I could have been hopeless, rejected

people, and given up on myself. But I scratched and clawed my way through my pain and kept going. Living for my dreams became my greatest treasure, and it wasn't all in vain.

"That's very true."

"By the way, Iris, where are your adorable children today?"

"Elpis is at home in the duchy. Luce is... Actually, she should be finishing up her practice right about now. I'm sorry, but do you mind if I go check on her?"

"Not at all. Go ahead."

"Mother, please tell me more stories again soon. And, Auntie, I'm sorry I'm leaving when you just got here. I'd love to hear more of your stories sometime," I said and left the room.

I headed to the sparring grounds of the Armelia mansion. It was a place for our guard to train, but lately we'd attracted some of the Anderson guard who had admired Mother too. Our two families were very close, so it wasn't a problem.

"Mother!"

I stepped into the area and Luce ran over to me. She was sweaty and covered in scratches, so she must've had a very good training session indeed. "Great work, Luce," I said with a smile. She happily hugged me, and I picked her up. I was still able to do it, but before long I knew she'd be too big. Seeing your children grow up was so bittersweet.

"I worked really hard today on my basic training!"

"What a good girl you are, Luce! You can tell me all about it later, but first, you need a bath!"

"Okay!"

I began to walk, still holding her. She chattered away happily about today's accomplishments and then boasted about Dida and Lyle complimenting her.

"I'm gonna work really hard so I can help you out!"

"Luce..." I didn't feel happy at all to hear her say that. In fact, I felt sad, like I

had failed her somehow if it led her to say it. “You don’t have to worry about that. You just do what makes you happy,” I lectured her.

But for some reason that made Luce look down as well. “Do you not want me to?”

“That’s not it. I think it’s very sweet that you want to work hard for me. I work hard because I have you too. Seeing you smile makes me happy, and when you’re sad, I feel sad. You’re my precious daughter, but you don’t have to do anything in particular for me. That will never change. I love you, Luce.” I kissed her on the cheek and put her down.

She had a thoughtful look on her face.

“Come on now, let’s take a bath.”

I left her to the servants and decided to wait in my room while I looked over some documents. But even as I worked, I kept thinking about what she said. It was very difficult to discourage her. No matter what I said, she was just so pure that I ended up going along with whatever she wanted.

Luce had said she wanted to get stronger so she could help me out many times before. And every time I told her that she didn’t have to and that I loved her no matter what. In response, she’d always get that thoughtful look on her face. This scenario had played out over and over again.

If she were an adult, it would be easier to know what to say to get through to her based on experience and her personality. But children were so unpredictable and earnest that you just couldn’t bargain with them. But of course, I wouldn’t try to bargain with my children anyway—that was just an example.

“Mother...”

Luce finished up her bath and came over to hug me while I sat in my chair.

“Feeling better now?” I asked, and Luce took a sip of water and nodded.

“Yes. It felt nice.” She clung to my knee.

I picked up my beloved daughter and put her on my lap. I hugged her tightly.

“I can’t breathe, Mother!”

“Oh, I’m sorry! It’s just, I love you so much!” I said. She smiled happily in return.

I tried to make as much time for her as possible, but I was so busy with work, it didn’t end up being very much. Both of my children were still so young, but they put up with a lot. It did bother me, but I couldn’t change my way of life. “I’m sorry,” I murmured again.

She gave me a puzzled look. “What’s wrong, Mother?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You’re strange, Mother.” She laughed.

I gave her a reassuring smile and snuggled her so that she didn’t see my emotions that were threatening to overflow.

Meanwhile, Merellis and her sister-in-law Marula continued their conversation.

“I can’t believe you’re a grandmother now! You certainly don’t look it.”

“I know... Time goes by so quickly.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to see them today, but I’m sure they’re just adorable, since Iris took after you and her husband is so handsome,” Marula remarked with a lowered voice.

“I’d love them no matter what, but I will admit they are adorable! I can’t believe I had a child and now she has children of her own. I never would’ve imagined this life for myself.” Merellis looked off into the distance.

“Why? Why should I give up my sword? Why are you telling me to do this, Father?”

“Why must I watch House Anderson’s fate unfold and not be able to do anything? Why do I have to sit here and watch while my loved ones are going off to battle?”

The words I’d said long ago came back to my mind.

“What’s wrong, Merry?” Marula suddenly asked, with a concerned look on

her face.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I was just thinking about the past. I was telling Iris some stories from long ago.”

Marula smiled. “I’m not sure how much you told her, but I bet she was surprised. No one would guess that a duchess went off to war, after all!”

“Who knows? She knows that I fought with the Anderson guard in the war to protect Armelia, so I don’t think anything would surprise her now.”

“But you haven’t told her about *that* yet, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I think she’ll be surprised. That part of the war wasn’t recorded in any history books, you know. She’ll be shocked that Armelia wasn’t the only domain to have ever fought against a kingdom by itself. Master Gazell was practically marching into his own death in that battle.”

“Wait, how did *you* know that?” Merellis asked with surprise.

“I’m Pax’s wife, silly. He told me.”

Merellis smiled wryly. “Of course.”

“If just one thing happened differently, we wouldn’t be here today. It’s a strange feeling, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I should excuse myself. Tell me how Iris reacts to your story! I’ll come back again to see your grandchildren.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Merellis saw her sister-in-law out of the room and then sat back down. “*If just one thing happened differently...*” Marula’s words circled around in her head. “She’s right. It would have only taken one thing to play out in a different way, and I wouldn’t even be here today.” she murmured. Her voice sounded cold, despite the warmth of the room.

Afterword

“HELLO, EVERYONE. I’m Merellis.”

“And I’m Iris. Today, we’re saying hello to you in the afterword for a change!”

“I certainly never expected to be featured in a story written in a country so far away! I’m honored.”

“I feel the same way, Mother. I have a letter here from the author. I’ll go ahead and read it.”

Thank you so much, everyone. I never dreamed that once the main story ended I’d be able to write a spin-off! It’s all because of my readers. Thank you so much.

Merellis might look like a lady on the outside, but she has a very interesting hidden past! I came up with Merellis’s backstory out of the blue when that one line popped into my head. I also was thinking that I really wanted to write more about her. She was featured a lot in the final volume of Iris’s story, but as I continued to write, I started wondering just who the protagonist really was!

There are a lot of characters in this story, but I wasn’t able to go into their backgrounds as much as I wanted to. This, of course, made sense, since Iris was the protagonist, but I couldn’t help but blame myself for it.

Getting the chance to write Merellis’s story was really amazing. Thank you so much for reading!

“That’s what the letter says.”

“I’m not sure what she’s talking about when she says the ‘main story’ and ‘protagonist’ and things like that, but at any rate, I’m so glad that people in other countries are able to read about Armelia now. And from what I understand, that’s all because of the readers. Thank you so much!”

I can't believe people in Japan are reading my story. You never know what's going to happen in life! To think I started out as a villainess, but now I'm the main character of this tale!

"What's the matter, Iris?"

"Oh, nothing. Really, though, you're the main character of this book and it's just as the author said—it's all thanks to the readers' support."

"Goodness, I'm the main character? That makes me feel a bit shy. Oh, so that's why we're being featured in the afterword this time around. I'm sure she wanted to include you some more as well."

"I'm not sure about that."

"By the way, Iris—do you know anything about this kingdom called 'Japan'?"

"Huh? Um, just some general knowledge about it..." *I can't say that I actually lived there!*

"I'm so curious about it. I'd love to go visit it someday!"

"Hm, I think that would be difficult."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"It's an island country that lies very far to the east of here. Father is still recovering, so it'd be difficult to take a trip that long, right?"

"Oh my! I could never imagine being away from my husband for that long."

"I thought so. You two sure do love each other."

"Hm? Don't you hate being apart from your husband too?"

"I do. But the most important reason is that I have my duties back in Armelia to attend to."

"You're so dedicated... Hey, Iris. Are you happy?"

"Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"Well, if your life was turned into a book, that means it was quite tumultuous. You shouldered such a heavy burden... Also, I'm your mother, so I'm supposed to be worried about you!"

“Mother, I’m very happy. I married the love of my life, I have two adorable children, and I have parents who worry about me even when they’re not with me, and Grandfather as well. I also have friends who feel like family. The burden doesn’t feel heavy anymore and instead I embrace it. Of course there were tough times, but difficulties help you appreciate the good ones, right? I was able to find happiness I never could have found within a game.”

“A game?”

“Ah, it’s nothing! Forget I said anything!”

“Mother, where are you?”

“Oh, it sounds like Luce is looking for you. We should excuse ourselves.”

“You’re right. Well, everyone, I hope you have a wonderful day, and I hope to see you in the next volume!”



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